

## Yvonne's story

Just over a year ago I "gave birth" to my son. I am still very angry about the way I was treated and whilst I feel the birth would have been difficult wherever I was, it was made worse by the attitude of the staff (being treated as an inconvenient pathetic first time mother), delays due to "lack of resources" (not enough staff) and oversights and mishaps which highlighted the cracks in the system, all of which added to my suffering but at the end of the day (to my annoyance) left me with nothing that I could actually sue them for.

From 36 weeks of pregnancy I had been complaining of sciatica. By the time I began to have Braxton Hicks, I also felt with each tightening of my uterus, a dreadful pain across my lower back, which I can only describe as a "back spasm". Ten days after my due date I began to have real contractions, but no matter how I tried to describe this indescribable back pain, the medical profession thereafter referred to it as "backache" and kept offering me "warm baths and 2 paracetamol". I was unfortunate enough to suffer from what's known as a "long latent phase", which meant that I was having contractions and pain but couldn't reach the official "you're legally in labour" milestone (4 cm dilated). By the time I was admitted to hospital (having been turned away once for false claims of being in labour), I had already had this pain (and very little sleep or food) for 24 hours. But because I was not in what doctors call "real labour", I was not entitled to any pain relief other than co-codamol (pretty much like paracetamol and basically as effective as 2 Smarties when it comes to labour pain). I was, after a certain amount of pleading, given some morphine. This allowed me to have about 2 hours sleep (this was now Monday night). Come Tuesday morning it was decided that I still wasn't really in labour, and glossing over the fact that I was in pain, I was evicted from the delivery suite and sent to the maternity ward, from where (we found out the hard way) the only pain relief available was.....you've guessed it.....2 paracetamol and a warm bath.

On the Tuesday morning ward round I was examined by a consultant who did take notice of my back pain and kindly explained that the only way the pain was going to stop was by delivering the baby and therefore ordered that I be induced in order to "get it over with" and allow me to also have an epidural once I got to 4 cm. My relief at this decision was short lived; I was soon after told by a midwife that they were too busy to take on any more inductions and I'd have to wait. The prostaglandin pessary (the start of the induction) was not given for another 24 hours after this, during which my contractions stopped and started, leaving me in agony with back pain whenever they started up again, and not leaving me long enough without them overnight to get any proper sleep.

After the induction on Wednesday morning, the labour certainly got going and so did the back pain..... by 3.45 pm I am desperate and my husband is no longer able to keep me calm or talk me through the contractions. The Delivery Suite, however, are "too busy" to take me. Eventually at 7.00 pm I start enjoying some Entonox on the Delivery Suite. It doesn't do much for the back pain but does help the contractions. At about 8 pm I get my epidural and finally am relieved of the back pain, although 2 hours later I start to complain of pain in my left hip. By midnight I am so exhausted my husband notices I am asleep bolt upright between the contractions. Overnight the contractions stop and start, never really gaining enough momentum and the hip pain increases despite the epidural. I am given more and more Syntocinon to stimulate my uterus. At about 10.30 am I am encouraged to try some pushing but the pain in my hip prevents me from getting into a good position to do this. At 11 am I feel some pressure and have another go at pushing, but the baby does not descend. I am noted to have "no maternal effort" and "no progress" and scheduled for forceps.

A consultant arrives (and in fact more and more people arrive from now on) and sets up for the forceps; someone has turned down the epidural so I can help by pushing when he pulls, but he notes that I by now have no contractions to push with and asks them to turn it back up to help with the pain.

Despite the epidural and swinging on the gas and air for dear life, my pain level goes through the roof. As he pulls I feel like my hip is breaking, I wish I were unconscious, I feel like I want to die and I say so. I remember being yanked down the bed as the baby is wrenched from my body.

A purplish blue wriggling 8lb boy is laid across my chest. Despite being out of my tree with gas and air and pain and tiredness, I know that something isn't right and I hear myself saying to him "come on sweetheart....." because he's not crying. He's taken away to the other side of the room, where paediatric staff are standing by. Initial attempts to resuscitate him don't go well (he has inhaled mucus and/or meconium) and a "crash call" is put out for a more senior paediatrician. Finally after 11 minutes of mind-numbing silence, we hear him cry and they show us a quick glimpse of him before he is wheeled off in an incubator to NICU.

Gradually the cast of thousands fade into the walls, my husband goes to check on the baby and I find myself alone, staring at the curtains, wondering why if my labour started on Sunday, it took til Thursday to give birth. Looking back a few months later, when I am physically and emotionally somewhat better and very much "in love" with my baby, I cannot understand why I wasn't shouting "bring my baby back!" and dragging my body up the corridor to find him!

The hospital "cock ups" continued until I finally went home 5 days after the birth, and included failing to test for anaemia until 4 days afterwards, at which point my discharge home was delayed by the need for a 3 unit blood transfusion. My recovery was slow. A huge and infected episiotomy made peeing a new form of torture, it was another 10 days before I could give up pain medication for my back, the baby was nearly 3 weeks old before I could walk round the block with the buggy and he was a month old before I drove the car. Added to which my brain was struggling to process the full horror of a) the forceps and b) having my baby resuscitated and taken away and I had nightmares and suffered from flashbacks when trying to fall asleep. When he was two weeks old I felt emotionally numb, as if I hadn't bonded and was unable to smile at him.

A lengthy letter of complaint did nothing to relieve my anger at the way I was treated and for months to come I still quietly seethed. I continued to feel as if I "failed to push him out" and wondered if I had done so, would he not have needed to be resuscitated. I also wondered if I had not been allowed to get so exhausted whether I'd have needed the forceps in the first place. None of the pregnancy or motherhood magazines seemed to contain anything other than "fairy tale" birth stories, leaving me feeling like I'd been cheated or that I'd failed somehow. There seems to be an unspoken rule that women who've had traumatic births will not speak out so that we don't scare the pants of ones who haven't done it yet. Antenatal classes and books covering pregnancy and birth do not give realistic impressions of operative deliveries either. Eventually I made some kind of peace with it all and finally when my son was nine months old I was able to look at him and think "yeah, but I made him – wow!" I think I owe my sanity to having had fantastic support from my husband all along and should apologise for not remembering often enough that he had a bad time too!

I am now considering a 2<sup>nd</sup> pregnancy and find that the thought of this has caused me to relive events, although I am pleased to say I do not have nightmares or flashbacks anymore. Going over events now, I cannot understand why, given that they knew I couldn't push, I had to be conscious during the forceps; it was painful beyond belief and brutal. I think my brain has filed it under "medieval torture methods"! There was nothing to be gained by my being awake, and if I'd been anaesthetised (as would have been done if I'd needed an emergency caesarean) I would have been spared the trauma. As other mothers with birth trauma have said, I think perhaps the only way to deal with these memories may be to replace them with better ones i.e. a better 2<sup>nd</sup> birth. However, I would not wish to be conscious during an instrumental delivery ever again.

I feel very strongly that several things need urgent review 1) the management of pain during the latent (not officially in labour) stage, 2) the need for women to be conscious during operative delivery if they cannot push, 3) the support offered to women who have had difficult labours/births and 4) why it is that a consultant's instructions, based on what is best for the patient, can be countermanded due to lack of resources and the implications for this on the suffering of women in labour.