

Women traumatised through childbirth and caesarean sections

I have been a consultant obstetrician/gynaecologist for the last four years at Rochdale Infirmary, Lancashire. For a long time I have recognised there is a small group of woman who want to have children, but have a tremendous fear of giving birth. Some get through this by going ahead with a pregnancy, stay terrified through the pregnancy and dare not confide their fear to anyone, and give birth in terror. The latter months of their pregnancy are marred with dread and worry. Some women are so terrified about delivery they become unable to have sex just in case they might become pregnant.

Why is it that these women are so scared about giving birth? Is it something soft about them, or are they being histrionic and attention seeking? After all, most women seem to get through birth without much of a song and a dance about it. Well of course, there is nothing daft or soft about these women, but that is very much how they can be made to feel.

For some women, the fear of giving birth stems from having had a previous traumatic delivery. For example, I had a patient who had a 18 hour labour with their first baby, had an attempted forceps delivery that failed, so then went to theatre for a caesarean under general anaesthetic - the baby was marked from the forceps and affected by the anaesthetic and traumatic delivery and so went to special Care Baby Unit for a couple of days. The mother had an unusual reaction to the anaesthetic and because of that and the fact she had bled a lot, she had to spend two days on intensive care. I don't think all the counselling in the world as suggested by the recent NICE guidelines is going to persuade her to go for a vaginal delivery again! As it was, I saw her six months after, and assured her in her next pregnancy she would have a planned elective caesarean section under spinal anaesthetic. Nothing more needed to be said and when she did again become pregnant, that's what happened. For other women, it was this or else something similar that happened to their friend, or sister, and this has put the fear of labour into their mind.

Sexual abuse is something we all have a higher level of awareness now than before, and I get the impression that some women who are wary about having a vaginal delivery, have been abused in the past and are naturally wary of people going anywhere near their genital region. Although some of these women may well benefit with APPROPRIATE SPECIALISED counselling, I doubt this exists in anything like the amount required. Also many of these women will view their history of being abused as a shameful secret to be told to no one, so they are not likely to come forward and talk of what happened, not at least to an obstetrician or midwife they have never met before. So they are not going to get the appropriate counselling that the NICE guidelines speak so highly of.

Although being pregnant can be a time of great joy with something very special to look forward to, it is also a time when women never before in their life have felt so vulnerable - any minor deviation from the norm can cast such a chill of fear into their hearts. Things that wouldn't cause a midwife or obstetrician any worry if it affected their patient - such as a trace of protein in the urine, or a slightly raised blood pressure, can cause women (and I can assure you their Obstetrician husbands too) to worry way beyond what it should. Whilst people pass comment and make value judgements about many things, matters relating to pregnancy are the things that people seem to feel most free to pass comment. And most of the comments are pretty negative. "Oh you're having a baby eh? Well your life won't be the same again, sleepless nights, no money, no nights out etc" Yet when other life changing events come along, such as learning to drive, earning a wage, first enjoying the pleasures of drink and sexual relationships, no one says "Oh well your life will never be the same"

Lurid stories of births are told "My sister had a baby, they had to cut her to get the forceps on", or "When I had my baby, I ripped terrible" or "I was in agony for hours and hours and the epidural didn't work" You rarely hear tales of what labour is really like (Unless you are friends with a number of good midwives) Yet, despite having been regaled all these stories, if the woman says right that's it I'm going to ask for a caesarean, the narrators of the stories will then turn round and chastise the woman for being soft or whatever "Your not a proper woman till you have ripped/tore/had 35 stitches" But do realise how you have your baby is your business and not anyone else's.

So, what can be done for women who have had a previous traumatic delivery? Well, the attitudes of some Obstetricians could change. However that is more easily said than done - in this fast moving world everyone is meant to have policies and protocols for absolutely everything , there are only approximately 1500 consultants in England and Wales for approximately 600,000 deliveries per annum, and with the best will in the world, no one can be all things to all women.

The best thing is to ask around. There are Obstetricians out there who are deeply sympathetic to you - Ask your midwife as she is going to know the low down of most of the obstetricians in the area, and if she doesn't know, she can always ask someone who does know.

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