AIMS For a better birth...

Through a glass darkly

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In May 1994, Rachel Whiting gave birth, at age 33, to her first son in Scunthorpe Hospital. The traumatic and frightening experience destroyed her confidence in herself and her mothering abilities, even her belief that the baby was hers. Eight years later, she managed to face writing the hospital to complain about her treatment. The following are extracts from her letter

My husband would not acknowledge my pregnancy and was cruel and sulky, so I wrote him off as having no future as my unborn baby's father. However, it meant I did not go to many antenatal sessions, and I was reluctant to be 'interfered with' as my baby was private.

I had written a birth plan in which I had stated that I did not want fetal monitoring, episiotomy, induction, syntometrine or ergometrine and no pain relief, and that I did not want the cord clamped immediately as I did not know what position I would want to be in until I was in labour. I suggested that I would prefer to sit up or squat on the floor with the support of someone's arms. The only part of my birth plan that was respected was my wish not to have pain relief.

From the moment I arrived at the hospital, I was treated like a farmyard animal to which the staff could do what they liked, however much it hurt, or leave me alone for hours and hours. No one said a kind or encouraging word during 28 hours of horrifyingly painful induced and speeded-up labour.

At one point, the midwife said I had high sugar in my urine and they needed to take my blood because the baby might be born diabetic - this was after some 20 hours with no one to support or encourage me.

When I refused to give blood, the midwife threatened and bullied me, and brought strangers in to bully me too. Total strangers passed in front of me shaking their heads in disgust or sorrow. I signed forms to say it would be my fault, etc., but that still didn't stop the midwife attending me from trying to persuade me to give the blood.

I was denied food and drink from admittance at teatime on Sunday evening until about 2 am on Tuesday morning, when I arrived-without my baby-on the postnatal ward.

There were numerous lies and inaccuracies in my notes. One of the doctors had written: 'She says she is not bothered whatever happens to her baby'-which was totally untrue.

The midwife who attended my birth wrote: 'Rachel eating full roast turkey dinner against advice'. This was a total lie- I was never given any food, let alone a roast-turkey dinner.

Later, the notes state: 'made aware of possible gestational diabetic effect on fetus' [where was the evidence that my baby or I were at risk of gestational diabetes?] and 'Refusing repeat VE . . . I will leave it till 18.00 and then try to pursuade [sic] her again'. There is no explanation of why a VE was considered necessary, and it is an example of the midwife's failure to respect my decision.

There was a third midwife on shift when my son was born, and she tried to hold me down, saying I mustn't sit up. She got my husband to help her hold me down when I was desperate to sit up. She made me push when I couldn't and, as a result, I split from vagina to anus. She seemed to see this as unavoidable.

My son was 6 lb 8oz at birth and had an Apgar score of 9 at one minute and 10 at five minutes. Despite this, and with no indication of any problems whatsoever, he was whisked away to the neonatal nursery to have an antibiotic drip. This was done without my knowledge or my consent. I was told this was because my waters broke too long before but, as I was not given the paediatric notes, I doubt that this was so.

The nursery was two floors up, and I was faced with much bullying and impatience during the next two days for trying to get up there to see him as I couldn't walk. I was also very ill with exhaustion, but received no sympathy for this. They didn't provide me with a breast pump to express my milk.

After my son joined me on the ward, I received a visit from the midwife who had bullied me about the blood; she told me she had had to call social workers in for me. When she said that, I felt all my hopes for my baby vanish forever.

She, and others, thought there was something wrong with me mentally-because I didn't fit in and, presumably, because I hadn't been to regular antenatal and had refused some things during labour. I believe this midwife reported me to Social Services out of vindictiveness to punish me for opposing her intentions. That woman took my child away from me (literally and metaphorically) and took my life too.

I had to fight with a psychiatrist to keep my baby, who found no indications of anything wrong with me, but even his report didn't convince the staff. In his letter, the psychiatrist stated that 'there were concerns that since she was admitted to hospital she was to some degree uncooperative, at times guarded, disorganized, unclean'. Clearly, instead of responding to my needs, the staff focused on my 'lack of cooperation'. It is hardly surprising that I was guarded as I was being constantly bullied and, while I may have been disorganised, I was certainly not unclean (and there is no evidence in the notes of that outrageous allegation). I also believe that none of these observations, even if true, should warrant a psychiatric referral.

The consultant threatened me with the Child Protection Act when I expressed a wish to go home. He had never seen me before, but believed the Chinese whispers of the nurses. It was then my baby died for me. I realised he wasn't mine-he was theirs and there was nothing I could do.

I felt I was a prisoner stripped of all rights, and all my pride and joy in producing a beautiful baby after 28 hours of agony, with no drugs and without kindness or a friend, had been stamped on. I felt maddened, as

a sow does if you take her piglets away. I wanted to reject my baby because they had utterly ruined him for me and crushed my spirit. I didn't want to look after him; I just wanted to run away from my torturers until they couldn't pursue me.

But I had to care for my baby. They monitored me as I 'bonded'; they spied on me and I was forced to play the role of happy mother while, inside, I didn't know how I would ever recover from what they had done to me.

One German paediatrician spoke to me in German-I am fluent in the language-and she told me how shocked and appalled she was at the way I was being treated. She had seen me come in and knew right away 'they' didn't like me because I had a mind of my own; she had heard them say nasty things about me while I was in labour. I got away after seven days.

The long-term effects

My son was 15 months old when I went to my first baby-andtoddler group. I looked around me and saw all these mothers laughing and smiling, feeling fulfilled. I felt like apologising for pretending to be a mother. I felt like saying, 'He's my baby, but I might not be able to keep him because I am not a proper mother'.

Labelling me an unfit mother with possible psychiatric disorders created a huge rift between me and my husband Chris, who had been very supportive during the birth. The terrible spectre of social-worker involvement made him express his anger towards me. So, not only did I have every midwife and doctor against me, I also had my own husband against me- and no support from my mother, with whom I do not have a good or warm relationship.

At home, Chris switched off. He showed no interest in the baby. I struggled to carry on, with a social workers' case conference looming about three weeks in the future.

I had to wait a month to see if I could keep my baby. After the case conference, the social workers came one last time to say I would not be put on the at-risk register as there hadn't really been much evidence put forward against me by anyone. But the file on me would be in their records to be brought to light if anything ever happened to my baby.

So that was their last word, which was no comfort to me whatsoever. They left me with a threat forever hanging over me that if my baby Jonathan ever had any accidental injuries, I would be under a new threat of investigation. After all I had been through, accused of horrendous child abuse through neglect, I had been as good as told that I would never be free of suspicion.

I wanted to run to the other end of the globe because I didn't see how I could bear this terror. Chris started bullying me, mentioning "unfit mother" or "Social Services" if ever Jonathan cried. His parents visited often, but my mother rarely came. Chris left me permanently when Jonathan was four months old.

Being a single mother meant that I had no one to talk to about him. I ended up in a tiny hamlet with no

shops and no transport, only a bus twice a week to Goole.

It took years before I lost the terror of the knock at the door. When my son was four and a half, I took him for preschool immunisation, one of the few I had agreed to let him have. The nice nurse said, "Right then, that is it until he is 11 and a half." I stared open-mouthed at her as a huge weight burst off my chest. I felt we were free for the first time. I had survived the monitoring and Jonathan had escaped being taken from me. By the time he was 11 and a half, he would be almost grown up. I nearly burst into tears of relief, but I managed to stop. I cried for about two hours that night.

The experience left me with a desperate need to protect myself and my baby from medical interference and threat, yet I had to go to the doctors sometimes, and that was a terror beyond belief.

I think my fear made them suspicious and, once, I felt I was attracting the sort of suspicion that makes doctors call Social Services. Jonathan was seven months old and very petite, and wouldn't eat much. The doctor thought he was underweight and told me he had to be monitored regularly. This felt like a death sentence to me, and I remember desperately arguing that he was just small, like I had been as a baby, and his father was naturally thin too.

Soon after this, I moved to Hull and dutifully took Jonathan to the clinic to be weighed. I was crying with fear, but trying to disguise it. The nurse weighed him and asked, "Any problems?" "Er ... I've been told he's terribly underweight," I replied. "Does he eat all right?" she asked. "Yes, he does," I said. "Well, you're not very big, are you?" she said. "No, this is what I tried to tell the doctors where I've just moved from," I said. When she heard I'd moved from Howden, she commented, "They've got time on their hands to worry young mothers there; they should come here to see what's worth being worried about. When a child is covered in bruises, you start getting worried, not when you've got a lovely little healthy boy like that. There is nothing wrong with him."

He was finally mine - for the first time. My recovery began then. I have had to wait decades for a broken heart to mend, and those professionals at Scunthorpe Hospital added another five and three-quarter years for me to endure until I had a second baby, who filled up my broken heart and whom I knew was really mine.

I probably spent a lot of my first four years with Jonathan as a single parent in tears. I still cry at least three times a day - when I read the newspaper at my gym, watch telly or read in the bath. Any time I am not on full parent duty, the tears start pouring out because I am still traumatised by the threat to my baby (now eight). Every day of being Jonathan's mother is a reminder of the threat to take him away from me, and I can never escape it because I am always his mother.

If I had been in a loving relationship, it might have healed sooner - or if I had had support to put it into context, or if I had had a family to look after me and cherish Jonathan, or if I had discovered AIMS earlier and hadn't spent four years unable to tell anyone of the terrible shameful thing that had happened to me because I must have been the most wicked woman ever to give birth.

I had no idea I was not the only woman this had ever happened to. If I had had any of these things, it might not have blighted my life so badly for so long. I had no resources, only my own strength to pull us both through. My mother took only a cursory interest in Jonathan, with the frequent hint at my 'mental fragility' if I ever said how hard it was being a single parent. I see her about once every six weeks. I still am unable to tell her to take a running jump - she is my mother.

And now

I have never stopped listening for the knock at the door, although my child is very happy and now fine. I had a problem inside with a 'dead child' - the one they took away - and the boy who lives with me. I could not join the two together in my mind. I thought for many years that they had stolen my baby. I did not feel safe, and I never felt as if I was a proper mother. The days and years, until now, have been a gradual process of trying to believe he is my baby, my child, and that I do have the right to keep him.

I was fortunate to find two midwives who were able to support me through my second pregnancy and birth. They were kind, considerate and supportive; the experience could not have been more different. As a result, I was able to face making a complaint about the substandard attention and bullying I was subjected to at Scunthorpe Hospital.