AIMS For a better birth...

Miracle baby

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By Salli Ward



I didn't know I was pregnant until I was over 16 weeks gone and that was just an estimate. I was breastfeeding my first baby and noticed some soreness, and I had felt mildly sick for a couple of weeks. I must have felt it worth doing a pregnancy test but was still shocked that it came back positive. Without oversharing, let's say there hadn't been many opportunities since my first, though I always have said I could get pregnant looking at a man across a crowded room.

I was 27 and a little scared of the world but on birth and breastfeeding I knew my mind. I'd had my first baby at home, having had to find a new GP willing to cover me. It was all good and I felt hugely confident. My son was born 25th September 1988, at home, after under three hours of labour. My daughter was 17 months old.

Liam was a biggish baby – 8lbs, 12 oz – and looked a bit bruised and battered on entry. He also went a bit blue, which the midwife blamed on him getting a bit cold while she checked him over after having to extract him a little forcefully – his shoulder got a bit stuck, I was told. Still, he warmed up and fed straight away. All was well.

A few days after he was born, when the midwife was still visiting frequently, I noticed a strange, raised bruise on his wrist, but was told it was nothing to worry about. His umbilical took a while to settle and bled more than I thought was normal. I worried but was assured it was all ok.

When Liam was two weeks old he didn't wake to be fed in the night. I picked him up a couple of times and he wouldn't latch on. He seemed like a sleepy, peaceful baby, but just didn't want feeding. By morning, however, I knew something was wrong and took him to the nearby GP. My husband was still at home and so could look after our daughter.

I know now that the GP suspected meningitis, but at the time she just said we had to get to hospital. We lived in Southampton where there was a big teaching hospital, which did turn out to be important. We had one couple we called 'friends' locally – we weren't Southampton natives and I'd only been there three years – so they looked after our daughter.

Arriving on the hospital ward was like a scene from a TV medical drama. I recall, perhaps a little melodramatically, huge double doors that opened magically and a swarm of medics lined up to meet us. Liam was whisked away as we were asked a flurry of questions. Somehow we ended up in a single bed room waiting for results and somehow we heard that he didn't have meningitis but was gravely ill, in a coma, not expected to live. Eventually – and I don't know if it was that day or the next – we heard that a student doctor had been studying haemorrhagic disease of the newborn and suspected it might be that. It was. It was explained to us that some babies aren't born with enough vitamin K, which helps blood to clot, and that – weirdly – breast milk doesn't provide vitamin K so babies born in hospital are given a dose at birth. The illness is rare and Liam had 'late onset', which means it hadn't shown itself at birth (though, I think it did), which is even rarer. Babies can bleed from anywhere; my baby had had a brain haemorrhage.

He was operated on to remove what these days we refer to as 'half his brain' – given the size of the bleed and the tininess of the baby, I'm not sure we're wrong. He was wired up with a machine breathing for him and we started living in that suspension-of-life state that people with sick children will recognise, though I am fully aware that our initial trauma time was relatively short. My parents had arrived to look after our daughter and I remember them in and out of the hospital, my mum putting her arm around me – which she never did. My sister had died in childhood, so I knew children die sometimes. I never felt, 'why us?' – it almost seemed inevitable, if a little unfair.

Periodically the consultant – we called him Mr Miserable – came to look at us seriously and emphasise that Liam was likely to die, a nurse standing by to comfort us if we cried more than Mr Miserable could cope with. Spoiler alert – it all turns out ok, but honestly, we did laugh about it even at the time. My dad was a church minister, and my best friend a committed Catholic - we thought it hilarious that Liam was

receiving intercessions from several different denominations and all over the country. I offered a few prayers of my own in the hospital chapel – including the inevitable, 'I will never do anything wrong ever again if you will just let my baby live'.

Anyway, God kept his side of the bargain – but not before putting us through some agony. About 10 days after we entered the hospital, we were told they would turn off the breathing machine to see how Liam managed. Apparently, it would breathe for him but give him a chance to breathe for himself. He didn't breathe. We were given a deadline – I think it was 12 hours – and still he didn't breathe. I believed he was dead and sent my husband down to be with him, wanting someone to be with my dead baby but not wanting it to be me. We were ensconced in a hospital parents' room, me trying to pump milk by hand (someone lent us a machine after a while).

There's something peaceful that comes over you when you accept the loss. Hope hurts – and that pain surged through me again when my husband came in to tell me Liam had taken a breath. Later, he took another one and then more and within a few hours – he wasn't in a hurry – he was breathing for himself.

Together with my miracle baby, I found myself on a children's ward – for 0 – 2 year olds. I wanted home births because I don't think birth is an illness, but goodness me, when there*is* an illness, the medics – the NHS – all the accolades are deserved. However, now in the land of 'business as usual', I was up a whole night as Liam breastfed. I would have happily done that for a month. The nurse, however – on this specialist baby ward - told me I would run short of milk if I fed him so much. I even said, through bleary smiles, that he was building up my dwindled milk supply. In fact, I had bottles and bottles of frozen milk in hospital-issue containers. I kept one for many years (the container, not the milk) and could cry each time I saw it in the cupboard.

Within a few days we were taking Liam home – huge staples in his head, referrals to specialists and outpatient appointments weighing us down. My parents brought our daughter in to escort us home and she declared, 'Baby!' on seeing her little brother. 'Yes, our baby – Liam', I replied (I was acutely aware of how bizarre and unsettling it all must have been for her). 'Leemy', she said. That moniker lasts to this day.

Back home he put on weight quickly, had the staples removed (his hair never grows on the scar); we moved back north and a health visitor came round to see the sickly baby who had been referred – only to find a pudding of a child with no signs of illness or developmental delay.

When I had my third baby at home 2.5 years later, I took her to a hospital appointment to have the vitamin K injection and was accused of putting her life at risk by having her at home after my son had that dreadful condition. I must have been in the post-baby bubble because I didn't batter him with a bag of nappies, but it angers me to this day. I believe babies now get the injection even if born at home.

Anyway, Leemy half-a-brain went on to study Philosophy at Durham University (not until a bit later) which provided all the training he needed to become a professional blues harmonica player. My husband eventually became my ex-husband but was always a great dad, until sadly he died early – leaving me as the only keeper of these memories.

God and I are still negotiating on our deal and Liam doesn't even believe in him. He married a doctor, though.

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