AIMS For a better birth...

Two birth stories I love

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By Sue Boughton

A massage client gave birth in my home

This is one of my favourite birth stories. It is written with the permission of the mother who I will call N.

When N came to see me for a pregnancy massage at the Active Birth Centre therapy clinic a few years ago, she was 40 weeks pregnant with her 2nd baby. She knew exactly what she needed and that was to relax so that she could give birth. N told me that she wanted a homebirth but as they were having major building work done in their home it wasn't going to be possible. She was upset about this as she had given birth to her first baby at home, and she also mentioned that she wasn't getting on very well with her partner. This was hardly surprising given the stresses of being heavily pregnant whilst living in a building site!

At the end of her massage N asked me if she could come for another massage in a couple of days time if she hadn't gone into labour. I said, yes of course, and then I added something that I've never said to anyone before, I said, "I don t think you'll need to, your body is so ready for labour, i'm sure you'll have given birth by the end of the weekend". This was Friday evening.

N called me the next day and asked if she could book another massage. She had started to have surges[1] after the first massage, but had gone to her mother-in-law's that evening, was stressed by the visit and her surges had stopped, so we arranged for her to come to my home for a massage on Sunday evening.

N drove herself to my house but didn't tell me until afterwards that she'd had a few surges as she was

driving over. She had a few more surges during her massage and half way through she went to the bathroom and had a big surge on the way downstairs. I suggested that she call her partner to come and pick her up as I wasn't going to let her drive herself home or even to the birth centre, which was in Islington, so not far from my home. I simply thought, well, this is good, she's in early labour now so she can go straight to the birth centre after her massage.

N asked me to continue her massage and said that she would call her partner afterwards. I asked my husband to go and get her phone as she had left it in her car. N's waters broke while she was still on the massage couch after calling her partner! She shouted, "take my pants off, take my pants off!", as of course they were wet. So I helped her take them off and at that point it dawned on me that she was about to give birth and there would be no time to get her to the birth centre after all. She called her partner back to ask him to hurry up and then I called 999 just in case we needed help. I am totally confident in a woman's ability to give birth and I know that if a baby is coming quickly, at term, that it's not a problem, but I do feel nervous after the baby is born in case the baby has any trouble breathing. I am not trained in resuscitating newborn babies, so calling the paramedics is for this reason. The woman I was speaking to asked me all sorts of strange and sometimes hilarious questions: "How old is the mother? "Is the mother breathing?" How she couldn't hear the N groaning and yelling, "catch my baby, catch my baby" I will never know!

So I tried to get N back on the couch and into the knee/chest position to slow things down but she wasn't going to move anywhere; she was standing and leaning over the couch so I pulled some of the towels off the couch onto the floor in between her feet. I knew how hot and slippery a baby is from a previous BBA[2] and I think I was worried about dropping her baby. Crazy thoughts go through your head in these moments. N literally gave two grunting pushes and you could see some of her baby's head, so I suggested that she breathed slowly and her baby's head was born a few minutes later. Then she shouted, "catch my baby" and her baby boy was born, amazingly hot and very wet. I managed not to drop him and I passed him to her through her legs as she sat down. I wrapped a big towel around her shoulders and covered her baby with other towels to keep them both warm. Luckily, as she'd been having a massage, the room was warm and dark and there were plenty of towels to hand! N looked at her baby and then looked up at me and apologised for giving birth in my house. I certainly didn't need an apology; I thought it was amazing, a complete blessing and the most exciting thing to have happened in our home for years!

The paramedics arrived and I managed to get the second paramedic and their student to wait in the kitchen while one of them came in to check that the mother and baby were ok. I wanted the least disturbance possible as her placenta hadn't come yet.[3] The paramedic wanted to cut the cord but N asked him not to as she wanted to wait for her placenta to come first. He was surprised by this and not very comfortable, so I gave him a brief explanation as to why optimum cord clamping is a good idea[4] and then he was happy to wait. Amazingly, N didn't bleed at all. It was the 'cleanest' birth I'd ever seen. About ten minutes later her partner turned up. He was a bit in shock that he had missed the birth, but he was happy to meet his son.

It was interesting to find out how the emergency services work in this situation. They stayed on the

phone until the ambulance arrived, then the paramedics stayed until the midwife arrived. So N was actually booked for a homebirth after all and luckily we live in the same borough so one of the Islington community midwives came to see her and helped her birth her placenta - into my salad bowl, which I let them keep...

The reason I love this birth story is that it shows perfectly how the environment and the atmosphere are so important. N was very relaxed as she was having a massage; the room was warm and cosy; candles and fairy lights were on; calm, relaxing music was playing; and, even though we didn't know each other well, N knew I was a birth doula and must have felt safe enough to let go. She also reminded me very much of a good friend, so I felt like I already knew her, and this may have helped too. N was like a cat looking for a warm, dark, safe place in which to give birth. A few days later she said that my massage room felt 'womb like'. It does have one soft, dark red wall and red fairy lights in it, but I'd never thought of it that way before.

Mum, Dad and baby left our house a few hours later, healthy and happy (with the placenta in the salad bowl), and we sat down and had a glass of wine!

Holding out for the birth centre

I love this next birth story too, as it shows how lovely and relaxed a first birth can be and not what anyone expects. It is shared with the parent's permission

This was H and A's first baby and they were planning to use a local hospital birth centre. H noticed some of her 'show' one evening and later that night she felt her surges beginning. Her husband calls me around 2 am; the surges are irregular but already between three and six mins apart and H is feeling nervous. I suggest she has a bath or sees if moving around helps. Everyone expects a first time mum to have hours and hours of pre-labour while the body gets prepared and for the hormones to build up before labour really gets going, but it doesn't always take a long time.

A calls me again at 3.30 am. H's surges are three mins apart and very regular now so they ask me to come over. H is coping really well, breathing calmly whilst leaning over the birth ball in their candle-lit front room. She's listening to a Hypnobirthing App that handily doubles as a contraction/surge timer. Very soon the surges are building and getting stronger, I give H some Aconite (a homoeopathic remedy for fear/worry)[5] and I run her another bath. H is quiet and focused in the bathroom with her partner for about half an hour. Her surges are now much longer and stronger, so A calls the birth centre around 5.30 am. He is told that the birth centre is dealing with an emergency and that they should either go to the labour ward or stay at home for longer. They decide to stay at home when I reassure them that we have plenty of time.

Around 7am they say that they want to go in and I agree that it's probably a good idea as her labour is now looking pretty strong and appears to be moving quickly. I don't want to end up with a stressful rush to the hospital in rush hour traffic. We arrive at the birth centre (which is in the hospital) to find it

deserted, no staff and no labouring women! I make various phone calls to try and find out what's going on. Clearly it's a busy night for births in North London. H is calm and focused with her headphones (listening to the hypnobirthing app) and with her eye mask on.

I find them a comfortable place to wait with H sitting on a birth ball while I go upstairs to the labour ward to find out what's going on as no-one is answering the phone. After speaking to the midwife in charge of the labour ward and finding that the labour ward is full (though I don't tell H and A that as I don't want them to worry), we go to the antenatal ward to wait for the birth centre to open. We're hoping that the day midwives will come in at 8 am.

A midwife listens to their baby's heart rate and we get settled into a cubicle on the antenatal ward. It's quiet at least and there are midwives there if we need them. Apparently, today there are staff shortages and no midwives are available for the birth centre, so we wait, with fingers, toes and legs crossed, hoping that more midwives will be found and the birth centre will open soon.

H is coping really well considering this quite major hiccup in the proceedings. She accepts the offer of a VE and the result is that she's in active labour - well we knew that! - and the baby is in a good position, his/her heart rate is perfect and so all is well. H repeatedly changes from standing and leaning on a table to kneeling on the bed, walking to the toilet and back to standing - the typical restlessness of a woman in labour. No-one suggests this, but she very wisely and instinctively keeps her headphones and eye mask on. It's daytime now, we can't make the cubicle dark, and it's not quiet anymore on the ward. At 10.40 am H is feeling a little pressure and is beginning to make little grunting noises. I keep checking with the midwives for updates on the birth centre. We have been told that it should be open again in an hour but that was a while ago. Now they say that a midwife is taking a mum and her baby from the labour ward to the postnatal ward and then she's coming to take us to the birth centre.

A is concerned that we are running out of time and the midwives suggest that we go to the labour ward if they can't or don't want to wait. We discuss it and I say that I think they have some time to go yet as H isn't really pushing or groaning yet and that the birth centre will be lovely and quiet, so they decide to wait. Finally at 11.35 am our lovely midwife comes and quickly takes us down to the birth centre. She listens to the baby's heart rate and does a visual check (not a VE) as H is clearly getting close to giving birth. The birth centre midwives start to run the pool as soon as we got there so H gets up and takes off her T-shirt and pants before getting in the pool.

As she starts walking towards the pool she says, “Sue, it’s stinging down there”, so I bend down to check what’s happening and part of the baby’s head is visible! The midwives and myself remind her to try not to push but the baby’s head comes as we guide H back onto the bed on all fours. There wasn’t time for her to get into the pool before the baby’s head was born. The shoulders come slowly and their baby is born at midday. The midwife passes the baby in between her legs and we help her to lie down and hold her baby skin to skin. H is in shock and cries with wonder and surprise, as does her partner, A. I look at the midwives, we are surprised that their baby came so smoothly and quickly. We all thought that there was time for her to get into the pool. Well, you just never know do you!

Their baby’s birth was a really lovely surprise for everyone and she was perfect - a good sized, gorgeous baby girl.

Author Bio: Sue Boughton is a longstanding AIMS member and is a massage practitioner and doula from the North-East of England now living in London.

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1 Surges is another term for contractions.

2 BBA stands for Born Before Arrival (of the midwife)

3 Editor’s note: The safe and timely separation and birth of the placenta is achieved by further uterine contractions, and these depend on continued high levels of oxytocin. Therefore it is important to maintain the warm, calm and quiet environment that increases oxytocin, so that this process is not disturbed.

4 Guideline: Delayed Umbilical Cord Clamping for Improved Maternal and Infant Health and Nutrition Outcomes. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2014. Background. Available from: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK310514/

5 College of Natural Health and Homoeopathy (2021) Homeopathy for Pregnancy, Birth and Beyond https://cnhh.ac.nz/homeopathy-for-pregnancy-birth-and-beyond/