AIMS For a better birth...

Doulas supporting clients to make a complaint

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By Anne Glover

I work with women from all walks of life, but one thing that is important to them all, is having a positive and satisfying birthing experience. It is important as a doula to provide a safe space for them to chat about previous births, to unveil any fears, to talk about why their birth unfolded as it did, and to discover what is important for any future births. It's important for everyone to have the confidence to ask questions, and to understand why their birth happened the way it did. Feeling powerless, not being listened to, not understanding what is happening and feeling out of control can all contribute to birth trauma, which is exactly what we are striving to avoid for the mental health and well-being of the whole family.

Sometimes I am asked to support my clients to make a compliment, comment or a complaint about the care they received during their birthing journey. When making a complaint, it's usually about something someone said or implied to them, or subjected them to, or when they felt scorned or laughed at. Sometimes it's the fly-away comments that stick and are the most scathing. More often it is something someone did to them during their care, for example, performing a sweep without their consent, prising open their legs, or taking their baby into another room.

It can be very difficult and extremely challenging to talk about hurtful memories when you are a new mum trying to get to grips with a newborn. Being in the throes of motherhood and adapting to parenthood are not conducive to raking up disturbing memories and can feel like rubbing salt into raw wounds. And it's because of these reasons that many don't make any comments or complaints. "Sure you're fine now and you have a healthy baby" can be persuasive enough to stop an emotional mum in her tracks. Most people don't want to be a nuisance, or to be seen as a trouble maker. Also they ponder, what's the point in going through everything again as it can't be undone?

So, why do some people go ahead and make a complaint? In my experience, many clients are looking for their account of the situation to be acknowledged and respected, and ultimately, for an apology to be given. They want to understand why something happened the way it did, or why someone spoke to them the way they did. Also the thought that it shouldn't happen to anyone else is enough to drive them to make a complaint. In many situations it's sufficient to have a chat with a midwife or doctor and go through their maternity notes to achieve clarity and understanding. However I have heard mixed reactions on the outcome of these meetings. Some women feel enlightened and very content, whilst others come away from these meetings feeling very low and unhappy, with unanswered questions and wishing they hadn't bothered. It's heartbreaking to see the dismay and disappointment especially when some women go to great lengths to have their voices heard, and then realise that some authorities just appear to close ranks and dismiss their complaint as a normal expected situation. A sincere apology does not always come through, and too often they feel they have been fobbed off with a headed piece of paper saying they will discuss their comments with staff. Generally this is thought of as a complete waste of time and energy on their part.

To end on a positive note, I can share that there are really encouraging responses from some complaints. Often these may be promises of steps to better educate midwives and facilitate further training, and sometimes a complaint can even be used, with the mother's permission of course, as a case study in the training or further training of midwives and doctors. So, while the complaint process can be frustrating it also has the potential of making a real difference.

Author Bio: Anne has been working as a doula for almost 9 years in Northern Ireland and has supported well over 150 women at some stage in their birthing journey. She currently volunteers on the AIMS Campaigns Team.