AIMS For a better birth...

# Motherhood - Am I on a different path?

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Image Mother and Child by Mary Cassatt

*By Jennifer Pearce*

A few days before my 21st birthday I was told by the hospital that due to my reduced lung capacity of 22%, caused by severe scoliosis and asthma, that having a baby would likely be impossible. Wham - those few words turned my whole world upside down. I'd always dreamed of being a mummy surrounded by lots of children - a house full of noise, fun, laughter and complete joy, but as I closed the hospital consulting room door that dream vanished. A sunny day had turned to the blackest day - what was my path now? What was my purpose now? I walked slowly out of the hospital, and I sat in a coffee shop crying, tears running down my face, sitting amongst strangers watching the world go by and mummies talking to their children. Time seemed to stand still as I sat holding tightly onto a hot chocolate - a warm drink meant to bring comfort and sugar for the shock - how wrong can they be. I'm not quite sure how long I sat there for, and the next few days were a blur, but one thing I did know was that I was on a

different path to my friends, colleagues, family - or so I thought.

Following this news, I set the focus for my 20s on my career and on having fun with my friends - taking life day by day and not planning or thinking to the future. It was the only way to survive. Block it out, don't think about it, and never compare. I was never envious of others as I wanted the best for everyone - something I think others found hard to understand. Everyone has a different path and this was mine. I packed a lot in, holidays, concerts, day trips and gaining professional qualifications in accounting and leadership. Throughout this time I did not seek help from counselling or friends, but my faith carried me through - something that still holds me strong.

My 30s were different. My friends were meeting boyfriends, turning to marriage and having beautiful babies - it was then that the news from my darkest day hit me again. Like before, I didn't speak to anyone. I didn't know anyone with my condition, 'nobody was like me'- it was very hard; it was a lonely time. I had no desire whatsoever to find a boyfriend; what was the point - didn't every man want a child? Wasn't marriage meant to equal a baby? So, what was my path?

A turning point took a huge leap of faith in humankind to maybe think I was worth something to find love…. and through my faith I found love in my now husband. We married knowing that having a baby could not be part of our plans. Sometime in our marriage, the hospital words 'having a baby would likely be impossible' kept appearing - was there a glimmer of hope? It was something we had to explore with professionals. I could not take unknown risks.

After a consultation appointment with the 'best' professor, a glimmer of hope appeared - it wasn't a clear cut decision as there were risks: we didn't know how many weeks I could carry for; it hadn't been done before - but I felt my lung function results didn't reflect what I could do. The decision was grey - not a yes or no, but support if we wanted to try. That was a breakthrough.

The next weeks and months weren't easy - this would be the biggest decision we had to make. I kept thinking, was I being selfish for wanting to be a mummy - what about if I couldn't carry for long - what would be the outcome for the baby? Finally, we both agreed the risk was worth it and if I could do it, maybe other women could become mummies too - and a path to motherhood could be real.

My pregnancy took place during the height of the pandemic - not only was I trying, like every else, to cope with a health emergency, I was also coping with a risky pregnancy - and until 16 weeks in silence from family and friends. We took the decision to hold off telling people until we were comfortable and strong enough to answer the questions. The pregnancy was risky so even to answer the normal questions was hard. "When is your baby due?" was tricky to answer and sometimes upsetting. We had no idea how many weeks I could carry for, but I was determined to get past 32 weeks for the health of our baby. We made it. 34 weeks and 4 days…every day counted. Although when I arrived at the hospital, I was so incredibly breathless; I remember the doctors saying: "Do you know your lips are blue?".

There were times when I couldn't even go to the hospital for the normal or extra scans due to the pandemic, which was very hard. It felt at times as if my health was coming first, which was difficult. A

special doctor from the hospital even came to my house (on the doorstep due to COVID) and dropped off blood pressure instruments to keep track of my health. I also had to wear a 'watch' which monitored my oxygen levels and sent data to the hospital. Throughout, I put all my trust in the amazing professors and doctors to keep my baby and me safe. I felt so secure all the way through my journey and it was the best decision. I had an amazing team of medical professionals looking after me - I was so incredibly lucky.

The birth of my baby was a planned caesarean. I always knew it was going to be and I also knew my baby would be premature. I didn't have a birthing plan - I was just focused on keeping COVID-safe and on my breathing so I could carry my baby for as long as I could. That was the ultimate goal. That would give my baby the best outcome for life. It did mean that I could not be with my baby for those first precious hours - the skin to skin - the moment every mummy dreams about. I was very weak after the general anaesthetic, my oxygen saturations were low, which meant I was unable to meet my beautiful baby boy for two days - that was incredibly hard and even now I still find it upsetting that my condition denied me that special moment, but I had a lovely knitted square that smelled of me that was given to my baby. That was a comfort as well as my husband being with our baby. I knew my baby and I had a lifetime of memories to make - so I needed to be strong both mentally and physically at this time.

With the most amazing professors and doctors a little girl's dream of becoming a mummy became a reality. My disability didn't define me. Instead, I had made a pathway to motherhood for me and many more. But it wasn't me who had done this - it wasn't my determination, my ability to take the risk or bravery. Instead it was the outstanding experts, specialists and the dedication of professors and doctors who gave me the greatest gift of all. They made our story. They are our story and this is something we will never be complacent about.

To show our gratitude we named our child after St Thomas' hospital. This is why stories like ours should be shared - to show the brilliance of the NHS and everyone who works there and to help ensure the NHS continues to break barriers and create miracles.

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