AIMS For a better birth...

We're Having a Baby

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AIMS Journal, 2005, Vol 17 No 3

Vicki Bevan reflects on a beautiful peaceful birth completely at odds with her hospital trauma

My third birth was a nightmare of intervention and mistrust. I came away from a preventable emergency caesarean with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and I vowed that I would never have another child. I was bullied and lied to, misled and abused, and, as a result, I never managed to get into labour. The environment was wrong, and the atmosphere unsupportive. It resulted in a birth which was so horrific that I could not relive it enough to take legal action. However, things sometimes have a way of righting themselves, and I was horrified to find out that my coil had failed and that I was pregnant with a fourth child. From that moment I vowed that this birth would be mine, whatever happened.

I managed to get through my pregnancy with only three antenatal appointments, at 20, 31 and 37 weeks. The low number of appointments definitely helped, as I found each one a very stressful experience, despite having my doula present every time. I had no screening and no scans, for two reasons, first I could not bear to go to the maternity unit for them, and secondly the results would not have altered my plans for the pregnancy and birth. I was not going to put myself in a position of looking for problems that didn't exist, or wouldn't be dealt with until after the birth. As a result I had a very relaxed pregnancy, and felt that I was in control of my birth plans. I made a very rigid plan for the birth, and an even more rigid plan for emergency caesarean, just in case. Somehow I knew I wouldn't need it, but it helped me to feel in control when the hospital began to take my needs seriously.

In a great rush of energy, we went to the Lincolnshire Show, my anorak son just couldn't miss 21 acres of farm machinery, so off we all went, despite the fact that the forecast was 31 degrees and I only had about 48 hours until the first of the 'due dates' given by the hospital. I spent all day complaining that I should have worn easier shoes, that I had backache and that there was too long a walk between loos... By the time we got home I was hot, cross and shattered...

I cleared up all the junk we had taken and dived into a warm bath, hoping that it would ease the pain. It helped, but not completely, so I went to bed early with a hot lavender pack on my aching back.

About midnight I woke up with raging backache and sat on the loo for ages contemplating the wisdom of a 4th pregnancy. There were trickles of fluid, but I really wasn't convinced they weren't wee, so I told husband Rod and then ignored them.

As I sat I began to develop a need for chocolate cake, so got up to make one. I guess that domestic flash should have been a giveaway, but I was giving in to my needs rather more than rationally analysing the situation. By the time I was finished I was feeling more comfortable and tired. It was about 3 am, and although I had mild, irregular contractions, I managed to sleep in the gaps, so put it down to having done too much during the day. By about 6 am I was up, cleaning the dining room of builders' dust and feeling antsy, but not really sure why (I am quite good at this denial thing). I decided that I should stay at home for the day, and cancelled all my plans so that I could play with William and rest. I was still convinced that birth was ages away, at least days, if not weeks. I was all prepared to go past the second 'due date' so I wasn't really expecting my baby to arrive until early July, but I put the champagne in the fridge anyway.

All day I had bunches of contractions, they would be every 5 to 10 mins for an hour or so and then go away. I trickled fluid on and off for most of the day, but never enough to really convince myself that it was my waters, I think that I was reluctant to sign up to the ticking clock, so I ignored it.

I got my first clue that things were really happening when the smell of our BBQ made me feel sick, rather than the more usual starving. Instead of eating I went and sat in the bath in the dark and felt very, very mellow.

I then spent the next few hours alternating between the bath, the loo and pacing the sitting room, probably a good thing that it involved lots of stairs! By about 9pm I was having contractions that made me stop and think, but they were still very irregular, and kept fading away.

As it got dark the contractions got more intense, and soon were taking effort to breathe through, but I was relaxed lying over my birth ball in the sitting room. As the contractions still weren't very regular, every three minutes and then not one for 15 - 20 minutes, I was convinced that I had ages to go. Rod lit all the candles we possess, as he knew I didn't want electric light, and he didn't want to sit in the dark. The effect was wonderful, only I forgot all about the special scented labour candle I had bought, it was still in a box upstairs. I really appreciated the gaps between bunches of contractions because I was now finding things hard work. By 11.45 I had had enough, I was telling Rod I should have just booked the Elective CS, and suggesting that I couldn't cope. He remained perfectly calm, and confident in me, which really helped.

I should have realized, but since the contractions didn't feel pushy at the end I thought that I would have to cope with a lot more before transition. I was getting seriously worried about how I would deal with the rest of labour when everything stopped. Absolute silence. I hung onto Rod for about 5 minutes waiting for another one, but there was nothing. We decided to sit it out for an hour, I would lean on my ball and rest, Rod would try to sleep on the sofa, and if nothing restarted we would go to bed. After about 10 minutes of trying to balance on the ball, trying to stop it rolling away with elaborate cushion arrangements and getting more and more frustrated, I slung it in the corner and piled all the cushions on the coffee table and lent on those. I guess within seconds I was asleep, and it was bliss. Just before quarter to one I woke up with a sharp pain, a gush of fluid and a desperate urge to push. I rubbed my aching belly and asked my baby if it was ready. I squatted to try to stand and yelled at Rod to "wake up,

we're having a baby". His reply: "I know, you have been at it all day" and he shut his eyes again. I yelled (probably screamed, because it felt really good) "Now!", there was a head, and within two pushes a face then a body. Rod was kneeling, stroking my hair, wondering whether to catch his baby or grab the phone. I caught our baby, who did a curious somersault and a loop of cord just slipped over his head. I sat back completely dazed and feeling like I could do absolutely anything. I have never felt so powerful, so invincible, so amazing. We sat and gazed as our new baby cried and then rooted and latched on.

Our eldest child came downstairs, gazed silently at his new brother for a while and then went quietly back to bed, the other two slept through everything.

When we had spent some time just being together, Rod called the midwife, and we sat and had tea and toast whilst we waited for her. I had champagne and cake ready, but I felt so high already that I didn't want it.

We were in bed, bathed and refreshed before dawn, and I was woken by my three big children crawling into bed to see their brother. A perfect meeting after a perfect birth.

HAPPY BIRTH DAY AFTER THOUGHTS

As I look back and think about this birth, I have learnt a lot. I know now that my caesarean birth would have been the same, if only I had been left alone. It began the same, and I am sure that if I had not called the midwives as instructed when my waters started to trickle, the birth would have happened with peace and dignity.

Even though this birth did not go according to plan, the outcome was better than I hoped for. I had planned to use a pool, which was not due to arrive until the Monday. I had planned to call my doula when I felt that I was nearing the end of the first stage, but I didn't manage that either. I had tapes and scents to help with the labour, but I didn't need them. I saved up lots of techniques and distractions for when things became unbearable, but because I was so relaxed it never did, I got as much as I could cope with, but no more.

This time I made the rules. I did not call the hospital at the first sign of fluid. It was clear and I felt confident in my body. I let my body get on with things at its own pace, and I never experienced the measurement of progress so many women find so disheartening. I knew that something was happening, and decided to let it happen at its own speed.

I was able to hide alone and in the dark every time I felt the need to, and my husband and children respected that need. I was not disturbed, or examined, and I only spoke when I wanted to. I was able to wander freely through familiar surroundings, and alter my environment, light and temperature entirely at my whim. I could get in and out of the bath, and on and off the loo as I wanted. I could light candles, use scent, play with my children and relax exactly as I pleased.

I was also able to sit through a very long transition, about 45 minutes, without anyone making comment

about halted labour. I had read much about the "rest and be thankful" stage of labour, and seen it happen in animals, but I never expected to be relaxed enough for it to happen to me, and had I realized it was happening, I probably would have been far from relaxed. But my mind was elsewhere, and my body and my baby were happy doing their job.

I know that I would not have had the birth I wanted in hospital. It would have been too frightening, and would probably have ended in a repeat caesarean. Probably I would not have achieved it with the midwifery service on offer to me here, but alone and in peace, I managed to have my perfect birth.