



## You have the right to refuse to see a health visitor

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*Jo Broughton describes how she gave birth without problems to her 10lb 8oz baby in Glasgow. She saw no reason to see a health visitor but was then reported to Social Services*

In April 2004 I was overjoyed to discover that I was pregnant. After a less than favourable experience with the birth of my daughter in 1998 I decided to consider a homebirth with an independent midwife. I made an appointment to see my GP and was left in absolutely no doubt whatsoever what she thought of my plan! She advised me that she would "refuse to be involved" in my care if I elected for a home birth. Having an already uneasy feeling about consulting this specific GP I listened politely and left.

In the end we decided not to use an independent midwife (due to concerns I had after my previous labour was induced) and I had my ante-natal care delivered at the local ante-natal unit. I cannot fault their care and must highly praise the attitude of the Sister at the time who restored our confidence that perhaps not all NHS staff were hell bent on passive compliance as the only option. Ben was born at 13.38 on 7th January 2004. Delivered completely naturally, after a labour of 3 hours, he weighed in at a scale tipping 10lb 8oz! I left hospital after the 'required' 6 hours and returned home to my family to start the next happy phase of our life together... or so I thought.

We had the standard visits from the community midwives who 'ummed' and 'ahed' in the right places, and ticked their boxes without actually listening to what I said to them. Despite having given birth to a big baby I was very happy that he turned out to be the world's easiest baby and I felt physically on top of the world. "Make the most of it", I thought to myself and we went about our daily business firmly embracing how positive we felt. The midwives decided they were done with us and then came the time to switch to the dreaded Health Visitor.

I had already made the decision that I did not wish to use the Health Visiting service as, from previous experience, I feel it has nothing to offer which I wish to utilize. After a few visits in which we were either out or taking advantage of the opportunity to rest (the new mother's necessity) I was absolutely astounded to find a note dropped through my letterbox telling me that I was obliged to see the HV and if I did not conform to her desires then she would report me to the Social Services. Needless to say I was utterly furious that a supposed professional would use such an underhand and despicable threat and phoned the Surgery to express my disgust. Unfortunately the HV in question was unavailable and my conversation was conducted with a Nursery Nurse who again used the complete fabrication that I was under obligation to use the Health Visiting service. Obviously she wasn't used to well informed, literate clients more than capable of asserting their rights and communicating their wishes. I informed her that I

would not be using the Health Visiting service and would she please pass on this information on my behalf. She clearly did so as two days later I received a very polite letter noting my intention and providing me with details of services should I wish to use them.

A few weeks after this I came home one day to find that the social services had called. Stunned, I thought to myself that there must be some sort of mistake or cross over complication with the HV. The full impact of just exactly what had happened hit me a few days later when a letter arrived informing me that the Social Services were coming to my home to assess my family for potential 'child protection risk'. Those three words struck icy fear into my heart and I cradled my baby son and howled. How could anyone think that I would do anything to harm my precious children? That day was the lowest emotional point of my entire life. I'd been a student nurse, I'd seen the sort of people who were involved with the Social Services. I'd seen the squalor and the poverty, the drug use and the alcoholism, the illiteracy and the abuse...that life was a world away from mine. Surely there'd been some sort of terrible mistake?

Thank god I'd already found AIMS in my research into homebirth. Without the wonderful guidance of Beverley Beech I don't know where we'd be now! AIMS gave me all the information I needed to meet the Social Services head on and survive. We met the very amiable Social Worker who came to see us who was obviously attempting to assess if I was some sort of axe wielding maniac and just very good at hiding it! He was accompanied by a poor student (who shall remain forever 'Malcolm in the corner') who looked utterly bemused as to why he was sat in my house having an intelligent conversation and watching his colleague being taken to town by my mum (yay mum!) who made it quite clear that "I'm just doing my job" isn't a good enough reason to cause immeasurable distress to people without justification. The Social Worker asked his questions and looked suitably embarrassed when I informed him that the single amusing thing about these allegations of 'risk' through lack of contact with the Health Service was that my children actually saw a doctor at least once a week...their aunt is a Staff Grade Oral Surgeon. He made his notes, took contact details for my sister and left telling me that he'd be in touch with his findings.

He left an answering machine message the next day asking me to phone and despite phoning for a week solidly I never spoke to him again. I received no written notification of their findings or any further communication from them. That is until a few months later another letter arrived saying that they were coming back for another assessment. Thanks again to Beverley's great advice I knew what to expect and what I could ask of the Social Services.

The senior member of their team came and I had a very informative chat with her in which I was astounded to receive an apology from her about their lack of communication. She also made us aware that another GP in the practice had suggested, after they asked him for his assessment, that we were a potential child protection risk because (and this is a good one)... our daughter isn't ill. Lack of requirement to consult a GP now means you're a danger to your children! Well god damn us for striving to keep them healthy eh. I felt compelled to produce my appallingly healthy child for her to see just to prove that she wasn't suffering at all from being well fed and cared for!

She left after half an hour of discussion from which I was surprised to be left with the impression that she

could see exactly why I was concerned that they were assessing my family. She informed me that I would forever be labelled as being obstructive which sickens me as it stems purely from being able to assert my rights, the rights I have under law, which seem to be completely useless.

As far as I am aware that chapter of that particular section of my family's life is now closed but having recently discovered we are expecting baby number 3 I find my thoughts frequently turning to 'what if...' and I can't face the thought of consulting a GP. I am ashamed to admit that my son (now aged 22 months) is not registered with a GP and recently when my daughter required a medical consultation I made us wait until out of hours and then consulted the Out of Hours GP service at our local hospital, and my husband had to take her. I'm fraught with anxiety over how to approach this pregnancy and have decided that a home birth with an independent midwife is the only 'safe' option and the only realistic option as the NHS midwifery services have already declined to accept me without referral from a GP. I will never trust another GP or Health Visitor as long as I live and that's a dreadful, dreadful situation to occur as a direct result of a profession which is supposed to care for and support its clients through the establishment of trust based relationships.