AIMS For a better birth...

Stella's Birth

AIMS Journal 2007, Vol 19, No 2

Debra Flynn describes how her midwife's precipitant action in unnecessarily cutting the baby's cord resulted in an avoidable transfer into hospital

I am thrilled to announce that Stella Flynn was born on Tuesday, 25th July 2006. For those who know me know that this was my fourth baby, a planned home water birth, and that the last baby came very quickly, within two hours. This labour was completely different which goes to show you never can tell in this business.

I had a show the Thursday before and then niggles and contractions over the next few days but nothing really getting established. Monday afternoon, around 4pm the contractions became more regular, every five minutes, and stronger. I called my husband home from work and began to prepare for labour - convinced that this was it. Three hours on, there was no change but we felt we should let the hospital know as they had warned us that there might be a shortage of midwives. Sure enough when I phoned they told me that there would be no one available until 8am the next day. I tried calling some of the community midwives on their mobiles but they were unable to come too. At this point I became quite tearful. My husband went into assertive mode and called the hospital back insisting that they send someone out and that there was no way we were coming in.

It worked. A young midwife came out to assess me. I knew I wasn't in established labour and we had tried to explain this to the hospital but I think they were making a point and sent her anyway. When she arrived my contractions all but disappeared. She also offered me a sweep, which I refused. As she was leaving Berny, who made the home birth Diaries and was making a new programme about home birth arrived. She asked the midwife if she would mind being filmed - the midwife was not sure and left to go back to the hospital.

As soon as she had gone my contractions picked up again and I went to my room to labour privately. After an hour the contractions were strong and coming every two or three minutes so we phoned the hospital again. Again they said there was no one available, again my husband had to argue with them and they sent two midwives. The hospital also made it clear that they did not want their midwives filmed even though Berny had previously cleared it with the head of midwifery and the PR department.

When the midwives arrived labour continued with me using my ball and TENS. I was four centimetres dilated increasing to five with a contraction. I was surprised that this labour was taking so long, I had been labouring for eight hours now, the same length as my first. After a while I got in the pool. This seemed to

speed things along a bit and I felt I was in transition although it did not seem that intense. I also got an urge to push but again it was not that strong so I held back mindful of my second labour when I had an anterior lip. I mentioned this to the midwives but they seemed unconcerned and just told me to listen to my body. After a time of pushing with contractions getting stronger and longer there was still no baby. This again was concerning to me as during my last labour I hardly needed to push at all, she just slipped out.

After the next contraction the midwife listened to thebaby's hear tbeat and it was dangerously low. She tried to feel the baby's head on the next contraction but felt a lip instead. I KNEW IT! I was so disappointed and tired I just kind of gave up and started to cry. I asked the midwife if she could push it back and got out the pool and lay on the couch. The contractions were agony and I chugged on the gas and air which the midwives encouraged. Through my druggy haze (I couldn't see and hardly hear because I had so much) I heard the words ambulance and c-section mentioned. It transpired that the baby was showing concerning signs of distress and that the ambulance was on its way. If the baby didn't arrive before I got to the hospital then I would have an emergency caesarean section.

The midwife pushed the lip back and Stella shot out like a torpedo in a Niagara falls of amniotic fluid (yes, the sofa will never be the same again). On my notes it reads 'second stage two minutes'. The cord was cut immediately and Stella was taken away as she wasn't breathing and needed to be given oxygen and resuscitated. I was left on the couch with Berny (who had now taken on the role of doula rather than camerawoman) reassuring me. I was really scared, I hadn't even seen my baby before she was taken and no one was telling me what was going on. It was only when the ambulance men walked in to my living-room that I got to see her. I was given syntometrine also at this point so I could go in the ambulance with her. By the time we left the house she was looking good, had a good colour and was breathing normally.

On arrival she was checked over by a paediatrician and everything looked good. Finally, an hour after her birth I could hold her. She fed immediately and I was so relieved, disappointed and happy about the birth, the labour, the hospital, everything, I was quite overwhelmed. However, the hospital wanted to keep her in for observation so we were transferred to a postnatal ward. My heart goes out to all women who have had to endure post-natal wards at this point. I won't go into moany details but by 7am I was in tears and threatening to get the bus home. Luckily my husband went into assertive role again and made sure the doctor saw us first and by lunchtime we were home.

I am so happy that everything was OK in the end but I can't help feeling disappointed that the birth was so dramatic and completely different from what I wanted. It was stressful from the start with the lack of midwives and the tension between the hospital and us demanding to be seen and also their problems with Berny. I also feel the midwives should have picked up on the lip sooner as I did tell them of my fears (and listened to my body). Stella is doing really well and seems none the worse for her dramatic first hour in this world. I have also had time to process what happened and asked questions. It appears that the midwife who delivered her was a hospital midwife rather than a community midwife and so was unused to home birth. Basically she panicked when Stella shot out and cut the cord too early, so depriving Stella

of her much needed oxygen. The midwife did exactly what she would do in hospital circumstances when you buzz for a paediatrician. As there obviously wasn't one she completely over-reacted and sent us all off to hospital even though Stella was perfectly okay by the time we left the house.

I still feel robbed of my home bir th experience and of those precious first moments with my baby, all because of a hospital's lack of resources and mismanagement, but I'm sure these feelings will pass and I will put my anger to a more constructive use. However there is no damage done to Stella's and my relationship and we're both thriving. The treatment in the PN ward was the yucky green icing on the cake

However, on a positive note I have learnt huge amounts going through this experience which I can bring to my doulaing and of course I have the most gorgeous, healthy little girl at the end of it.