AIMS For a better birth...

Born in private and in peace

AIMS Journal 2007, Vol 19, No 3

Natasha Hawkes shares the story of her unassisted birth in the Canary Islands

During the last 12 months my husband and I lost our second little boy at 26 weeks due to oligohydramnios, we watched our first son turn 2 years old and on Friday 2nd March 2007 we delivered our third son into this world.

We live in the Canaries, on La Gomera. It is a little smaller than Birmingham and has one basic hospital an hour's drive away. The island's population is less than 20,000 and I should probably add that yes, it is idyllic!

There are three midwives on the island, two based at the hospital and one who is in charge of the antenatal appointments in each major town. There is no home birth option for expectant mothers and the hospital continues to practice some rather outdated methods, (constant foetal monitoring, an IV drip from the beginning of labour and only allowing labouring women to give birth on their back).

Having planned a home birth for my first son (which ended in a hospital transfer and an episiotomy), I was disappointed that it was not even a possibility this time around. My husband and I resigned ourselves to a hospital birth and never gave it another thought.

That was until I began having contractions at 34 weeks and was hospitalised for 24 hours, during which time they stopped - thank goodness, as there is not a special care baby unit on the island and the nearest one is in Northern Tenerife, three hours away.

At 35+2 weeks they began again.

The medical service refused to transport me over the island in an ambulance as not one of the medical personnel was willing to come with me. I was then rushed by ambulance from the hospital on La Gomera, onto the ferry and up to Northern Tenerife as a matter of emergency. The contractions had been consistent for 8 hours by the time we arrived.

When we arrived I was pushed to the Maternity Department and left in a corridor, separated from my husband, terrified after our loss last year and unseen by any medical professional for an hour and a half. During this time my husband was sitting the other side of a partition wall, with no information as to where I had gone, what was going on, nor as to why he was not permitted to come and find me. He too was terrified.

I eventually called him and asked him where he was and if he knew what was going on. I was a hysterical wreck but thankfully the contractions had well and truly stopped.

After being asked to stop using my mobile phone and storming out to find him we were finally seen and told everything was ok but that I should stay in the hospital for 24 hours for observation. I compromised and stayed on Tenerife in a hotel nearby, as at least we could stay together this way and get to the hospital should anything happen again.

On the journey home we began talking about what had happened. I had been fit, well and thoroughly enjoying being pregnant up until this point and was bitterly disappointed at being treated so appallingly.

I began researching our options. I was unable to locate a midwife anywhere in the Islands who would be willing to attend me at home and so arranged to meet with our gynaecologist to discuss some compromises. Needless to say these were not available and our decision was made to have an unassisted home birth.

We gathered the necessary equipment and medical supplies and armed ourselves with all the knowledge we could find about possible emergencies and what we should be prepared for should anything go wrong.

At 6.15 am on 2nd March my waters broke. I should say here that I had been talking with my baby since week 36 and asked him/her to position themselves nicely (not posterior like my first baby) and to ensure that I knew when labour was starting by breaking my waters and giving me enough time to prepare my music, refreshments and to call someone to come and watch Dominik, my two and a half year old. Whether this helped I will never really know but I certainly got all my wishes, including a smooth, fast labour (around 2 hours) at the right time of day and not night!!!)

I woke my husband. He asked if I was sure and I promptly got off the bed and ran to the toilet holding my legs closed. I sat down and whoosh, yes, I was sure!

He then gathered all the supplies (sheets, towels, baby scales, Rescue Remedy, arnica, music, snacks, juice etc) and we lay on our bed for about an hour calmly talking about our lives and how lovely it was that we didn't have to rush off anywhere! Dominik woke at 7.30 and we called our friend and said that she had better come over as it wasn't going to be long. I went into the transition phase and moved onto the floor on my hands and knees, which is the position I gave bir th in both my previous labours. At 7.50 my friend knocked at the door and Domink answered with a very comical, 'Mummy is upstairs breathing.' He had been in the room with us for a few minutes as he wanted to see me and had heard Shaun telling me to breathe slowly and concentrate on relaxing!

With Dominik safely out of the way things moved very fast. I guess I had about 6 contractions and Hannon was born at 8.24 am. I did not tear, I did not bleed to death (as the medical profession kept insisting I might), I felt relaxed and exhilarated. Hannon had the cord tied around his neck very tightly twice but Shaun was totally calm as he unwrapped it, turned him over and gave him a swift pat on the

back. I was telling him that it was all ok (I did not even know that anything was wrong but could sense that he needed reassurance and I knew that the baby was fine). Hannon was a bit blue but I was able to nurse him almost immediately and kept him very close for a very long time. He was not whisked off to be weighed, measured and scored. He was not poked by strangers. He was born into the loving arms of the two people whose love created him in the first place. In private. In peace. In total perfection.

We cut the cord about four hours later and mar velled at the placenta that had given him life. We introduced him to his big brother who was thrilled to see him and could not wait to hold him after waiting for such a long time to meet him. Dominik was not the least bit phased by the experience and has consequently been more than happy to have him around and is ver y patient and loving with us both.

This was everything I had dreamed of and I would not change a thing. Needless to say, should we be blessed with another, I would not do anything differently. Well, except maybe not go near a medical professional at all!

The moral of our story? Trust yourself and your ability to give birth instinctively and as nature intended, in love and peace.