AIMS For a better birth...

16 years of improvements?

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Pat O'Brien takes a critical look at the portrayal of birth

I noted with interest the Channel 4 programme advertised 'One Born Every Minute' [first shown on February 9th 2010].

Knowing myself, I thought I should probably NOT watch it for fear of getting wound up about all the issues I care so much about surrounding childbirth. However, against my better judgement, I decided to watch the programme in its entirety in the hope that I would be pleasantly surprised by the advances made in midwifery over recent years. After all, it is now 16 years since I had my first baby. Things had bound to be a lot better - hadn't they?

I had been right in the first place - I definitely should not have watched this programme as now I am not only thoroughly depressed, but also seething with anger.

I witnessed:

- A woman lying on her back to give birth, when she had already said she was most comfortable on all fours.
- The same woman being threatened that they would have to call the doctor if she didn't push the baby out quickly.
- A delivery room fraught and full of fear.
- A woman made to change position to allow for fetal monitoring.
- A midwife saying the baby's heart rate was dipping during contractions (as it does normally) but engendering fear in the mother that this was abnormal and telling her 'the baby has had enough now' as if to frighten the mother into pushing harder.
- The same woman being told she needed to sit further forwards in order to push, adopting a position which closes down the birth canal and makes pushing LESS effective.
- No one encouraging the mother to stand or get on all fours to harness the forces of gravity.
- No constant companion by her side to help her through the pain and provide reassurance that all was perfectly fine.
- A woman bullied by all those in the room including her husband and being instructed to push on request, and even to hold a sustained push for as long as possible (which is not good advice).
- A woman who, having been told her baby would be 'pulled out of her by the doctors' if she didn't push hard enough, was then told not to panic.

- A woman apologising throughout her labour for inconveniencing the midwife!
- And, I suspect, a woman who will leave the hospital grateful for the fact she has a healthy baby and unquestioning of all the compromises she was forced to make to the 'normal birthing process' and the risks she and her baby ran BECAUSE of those compromises.

HAS NOTHING CHANGED IN 16 YEARS?

'One Born Every Minute' is filmed at The Princess Anne Hospital in Southampton, described as 'a specialist unit looking after women and newborn babies'. Almost 6,000 babies are born each year under the hospital's care, and over 300 staff coordinate the care as women choose to give birth at home, at the hospital or at the nearby stand alone birth centre.

Channel 4 says that 'One Born Every Minute' aims to observe the dramatic, emotional and often funny moments that go hand in hand with bringing a new life into the world, from the perspective of the soon-to be parents and family, as well as the hospital staff.

'One Born Every Minute' celebrates what it really feels like to become a parent, by taking a bustling maternity hospital and filling it with forty cameras. Did that make a difference to care? If you have a comment, please do let us know.