AIMS For a better birth...

Dear BBC

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Holly Lyne's letter of complaint to the BBC on their portrayal of human birth

I was absolutely outraged to see and hear such terrible, inaccurate and scaremongering reporting on the topic of human birth on BBC Two's 'Origins of Us' on 31 October 2011. Not only were there grievous errors in the 'information' relayed to the viewer, but the accompanying footage of a woman in labour and the presenter's own bias following her difficult birth experience coloured the topic beyond reproach.

Some pearls from the presenter included 'Giving birth is the most painful and dangerous thing a woman can do', 'Humans are the only species that need help to give birth' and 'Even a straightforward birth is difficult'. The presenter then went on to demonstrate, with models, the passage of an infant's head through the maternal pelvis. First of all, giving birth is not dangerous. In the vast majority of cases, when a woman is supported to birth following her instincts, the risks are minimal and outcomes are good. In our highly medicalised birth culture, birth has become more dangerous due to the unnecessary interventions inflicted upon women, the poor levels of support and the dangerous conditions under which most women are expected to birth (in hospital, with bright lights, anonymous staff, stimulation of the neocortex etc.).

When birth is left undisturbed, unrushed and private, the neocortex is not stimulated and all the necessary hormones are free to flow, making birth shorter, less painful and safer for mother and baby.

Secondly, the vast majority of women do not 'need help' to give birth. Good support from a trusted midwife, who keeps her hands to herself unless a concern arises, is all most women need. In some cases, some obstetric help is required; however, these make up the minority. A straightforward birth may be hard work, it is called labour after all, but to state that it is difficult is misleading and scaremongering.

The footage shown may be footage of a 'typical' hospital birth in the UK, but the conditions were not optimum. The poor woman was labouring on her back, the least favourable position for birth, she had at least two midwives present, coaching her, a camera crew and bright lights. No wonder her birth was difficult! She should have been mobile, with minimal personnel present, dimmed lights and non-verbal support. Had she had this, plus good-quality antenatal preparation, her birth may well have been significantly easier and calmer.

The demonstration with the model pelvis and skull was extremely misleading and riddled with lies of omission. The presenter completely failed to mention the hormone relaxin, which is released during pregnancy and allows the pelvis to loosen. During birth, this hormone and upright or all-fours positions allow the pelvis to expand by up to 30%. Also, there was no mention of the fact that fetal skull plates are

not fused and frequently mould and overlap during birth, making the baby's head smaller.

These facts in combination make it perfectly possible for the vast majority of babies to pass through the birth canal smoothly and easily.

Evolution doesn't tend to make long-term mistakes. If birth were really so difficult and so much obstetric intervention required, then the human species would have become extinct centuries ago.

This programme, on the back of the inaccurate reporting of the new NICE caesarean section guidelines, which stated that caesarean sections are now 'as safe' as vaginal birth (which is a complete lie and not what the guidelines state at all) makes for extremely dangerous and misleading reporting. Women watching and listening to the BBC over that time will have been led to believe that birth is something it is not and may negatively influence their birth choices and both their and their baby's health. I find it very disturbing that your researchers have not come across any accurate information, or if they did they chose to omit it in favour of this inaccurate and sensationalist reporting. This is far below the standards I expect from the BBC.

May I suggest that your researchers be directed to the academic literature freely available online from such sites as www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/ and reference.medscape.com/ on the subject of birth, as well as literature by Dr Michel Odent, Ina May Gaskin, Prof. Mavis Kirkham, Sheila Kitzinger, Dr Sarah Buckley, and the Association for Improvements in the Maternity Services (AIMS), among others.

I fully expect a full public apology from the BBC for your inaccurate and scaremongering reporting and a positive and informative programme to air in order to correct the inaccuracies portrayed last night.

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The BBC responded but did not answer any of the points raised. As of compilation of this Journal, we are still awaiting a response that addresses the complaints made.