AIMS For a better birth...

An Apology to Emily

AIMS Journal, 2012, Vol 24 No 2

Lisa Sykes shares her journey to empowered birth

I'm still working up to apologising to Emily. It will be 18 years in November since her birth and while I know I don't need to apologise to her, I want to. I have three children. For Emily's birth, I had been booked into what was called the 'GP Led Unit' which was what they called a midwife led unit back then, but Emily, my eldest, was born in hospital on a consultant led unit. I guess in medical terms it may have been classed as an 'easy' or 'successful' induction. Nothing about it felt easy or successful. I was one week past the due date I had been given at my '12 week scan' so my midwife dutifully booked me for induction at 10 days past that date 'unless anything happened before then'. Unsurprisingly nothing did happen. Well that's not strictly true. I did get excited at the prospect that my baby would be in my arms very soon and really looked forward to going to the hospital on the Monday morning.

When I arrived at 8.30am on the Monday with my mum and husband and excitedly reported to the midwives' station on the ward, I was told I was too late and they didn't have a bed for me. My midwife had given me the wrong time to arrive, but I refused to leave. I'd been building myself up to this all weekend and I wasn't leaving without my baby in my arms. Eventually around tea time I was admitted and given a bed. I don't know if my unwillingness to comply and go home contributed to the way they treated me from then on but if it did, I wish I had just gone home while I'd had the chance.

The first pessaries were inserted at 7.30pm and I lay there excited and hopeful. My mum and husband were sent home as visiting on the antenatal ward was now over but, my husband assured me he would be listening for the phone call and would be right there by my side as soon as things started.

'Something' started to happen around 10pm. I spent the next couple of hours going to and from the midwives' station while the other women on the ward slept. I was dismissed each time by irritated midwives telling me 'you have ages yet', 'don't be silly, nothing is happening', 'here, have a sleeping tablet', 'here, have another sleeping tablet'. I felt like an inconvenience and not once was there a reassuring word spoken to me. As I sat trying to sob quietly on my bed I felt what I now know was the unmistakable sensation of my waters breaking. I waddled back to the midwives' station to sighs and rolling eyes to tell them I thought my waters had broken. I was told that I probably had wet myself and to go back to bed and sleep. No offer to check or even help to get changed. Just sent on my way again like a scolded child. When another huge gush of fluid soaked me, my bed and the floor I went back and pleaded with them to believe me. SOMETHING was happening! I HAD NOT wet myself! I was getting contractions! They reluctantly took me to what felt like a store cupboard; small and brightly lit, and

established that, yes, my waters had indeed broken but 'I wasn't in labour'. What? How could I not be in labour? Whatever this was that was happening to me felt like labour and if this was just the start I wouldn't survive! I begged for an epidural. I was so scared. I begged them to call my husband back. But they didn't and in fact they didn't call him despite my pleas for another two hours or more. I was left alone, petrified in my broom cupboard with gas and air but not told how to use it.

Eventually I was deemed 'in labour' and moved to the delivery suite. My husband arrived and when I asked where the hell he had been he told me they had only just called him. Once the epidural was in place several uneventful hours passed with midwives popping in and out to do observations, but we were basically alone. To be honest this was probably the most pleasant part of the whole ordeal.

At some point the following afternoon it was established that I was fully dilated and I was directed to push. This is when things became unpleasant again. For over two hours I was yelled at to push. 'Push harder!' 'No not like that!' 'Be quiet!' 'You're scaring the other women!' 'You're upsetting your husband!' I was getting it all wrong. They took my husband away from me and sat him in a corner and comforted him…comforted HIM, but yelled at me. In that room I was below both my baby AND my husband. Add to that being below every other woman in the delivery suite, as I was upsetting them too. I was alone. No one stood next to me supporting me. Not even the person who I thought was supposed to. He was being supported. I was being yelled at.

I've since had my notes back and been able to establish at what point and why they decided to extract Emily from me with forceps. These words are now etched in my brain and I know they will be impossible to remove. 'Lack of Maternal Effort'. Emily's mother did not try hard enough for her.

Having pushed on my back for well over two hours they decided that I wasn't trying hard enough and although there was no sign of distress they would need to pull her out. So that's what they did. They removed her from me. To be frank I didn't care. I just wanted the whole ordeal to stop.

I don't remember the actual moment she was born in detail. I think I had opted out at that point. I now understand the term 'Birth Rape' and while I'm not sure if it was what happened to me, I do feel that Emily's birth was something someone 'did' to me. It wasn't really something I did or even felt I was an important, active participant in. It just happened to me. They put my legs up in the air and the obstetrician put the great big salad tongs up my vagina and extracted her like a tooth. Then they all left.

I only remember one moment in the whole ordeal that someone said anything kind to me. Just before the pushing began a midwife said to me that her shift would end soon and she would be staying until I had my baby. Not exactly earth shattering or a tear jerk moment but it was the kindest, most vaguely supportive thing said the whole time.

So 14 years and a change of husband later, I was determined my next birth experience would be nothing like the first.

Thankfully the hospital Emily was born in had been demolished and in its place was a shiny new one with

a birth centre on the same site. The close proximity to the hospital gave my husband reassurance that his first born, our daughter Hebe, was going to be born in the best place. That same close proximity made me a little more nervous but it was the place we both felt most comfortable being in.

When that same sensation that had been dismissed as my own incontinence greeted me again, I was excited and optimistic. We headed for the birth centre after sorting out Emily and were greeted by warm friendly midwives. I immediately felt at ease. Labour stalled a little once we were there but we were told to make ourselves at home, encouraged to get into bed together or take a relaxing bath and just let them know if we needed anything.

Labour soon picked up apace and together, my husband and the midwives supported me with kind words, gentle encouragement and suggestions on positions. I laboured through transition in the birth pool and got out to give birth on a birth stool with my husband, physically AND emotionally, supporting me. Right there. Sat on the toilet seat in our en suite with me in front of him on the birth stool and the midwives knelt in front of me. Watching and waiting. Not once touching me. When I asked 'should I push?' they replied 'Do you feel like want to push?' 'Erm…no...', 'Well then don't…listen to your body Lisa…you tell us what you want to do…' This was probably the single most empowering moment in all my births. I was doing this!

I did it.

Hebe was born 15 minutes or so later into the waiting midwife's hands and I remember it. I remember EVERY. SINGLE MOMENT. I remember what I said, how I felt, the smell of her, my husband's tears and the midwives' smiling faces. I looked at my husband as I held my little girl on my chest and said 'I want to do it all again.'

So we did...16 months later…at home.

It was a couple of days after Hebe was born when my wonderful community midwife came to visit us and first mentioned home birth. I was revelling in my healing, amazing, empowering birth experience and she said 'next one at home then Lisa!'... So when I arrived back at her clinic nine months later we talked about home birth again and the seed was most definitely sown.

The first sign our third child would be joining us soon was my waters breaking, in bed for the third time! There was nothing much really to do or organise. Emily now almost 15, decided that she didn't want to be around for the birth and was staying at my parents' house, so it seemed easier for Hebe to join her and we could get on with labouring in peace. The day was spent pottering about at home, nesting, preparing the pool, watching films, drinking milkshakes and just generally relaxing.

Around 9pm we asked the midwives to join us and shortly after that I got in to the pool. I listened to Hypnobirthing affirmations, my own specially selected playlist, and laboured peacefully in the kitchen. We knew the midwives were 'there' but they gave us the space and privacy we wanted. My birth plan had said that I did not want any internal examinations and they weren't even suggested to me. The midwife

gave positive reassurance to us both and did not encourage or discourage me to do anything other than act instinctively. The atmosphere was light and easy. The labour was intense as my son decided to turn in to a posterior position for a while when I rested on my bed, but he then took the short route back and was born 20 minutes or so later, as I sat on a birth stool, again with my husband behind me but this time in our dining room. After a 10 minute physiological third stage we sat and drank tea and ate toasted currant teacakes as the midwives finished their paperwork before leaving us snuggled up in bed with our little lad, Sidney. Most people who know me and my birth stories assume that Sid's home birth would be my 'favourite' or 'best' birth. They are all special to me for the obvious reason, but the birth that had the biggest impact on me was Hebe's in the birth centre. I would have any future children at home, without doubt, but the feelings of validation, strength, empowerment and the healing that Hebe's birth has given me can't be properly put into words. To feel listened to, honoured, supported and respected is so much more important than the venue.

I'm sorry Emily didn't get the birth her brother and sister did. She, and I, deserved better. But I am also eternally thankful for everything her birth has taught me.

Lisa Sykes
Mother of 3, Doula with Everyday Miracle
Doula Services, Birth Advocate