AIMS For a better birth...

The Curate's Egg Service

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Laura Robinson describes her experience of overzealous health visiting

In December 2004, I gave birth to a beautiful healthy baby girl after a pleasant and satisfying birth. Everything went as planned. I had a very good birth, a gorgeous perfect baby, and a wonderful loving husband. Following discharge from the birthing centre, we drove back to our home. I remember the day well; my husband prepared some lightly cooked scrambled eggs, with toast and smoked salmon for lunch - one of my favourite meals, but alas, not one recommended during pregnancy!

Both my husband and I have had happy and rather uneventful childhoods. My husband had a settled and contented childhood. He went to school, obtained his GCSEs and A-Levels, entered university and, following graduation with an MEng, went straight into employment. I had a somewhat more chequered childhood, moving countries and changing schools, and suffering from depression as a result of bullying when I was 14 years old, which resulted in me having to change schools again (and hence exam boards) halfway through my GCSEs. Even so, I still managed to obtain my good GCSEs, A-Levels and graduate from a red-brick university with a BSc(Hons) and MSc. Following my graduation, I entered the workforce.

Neither my husband nor I smoke, we don't take drugs, we drink very little alcohol and we are law abiding. We don't have criminal records. We are just a typical run-of- the-mill, average couple, making their way in life. Following the birth of our little girl, a friend said about the health visitor, 'You'll see her once for the initial home visit and never again.' The reality is I was seen by the health visitor on 20 occasions within nine months, and it took a further six months to change to another health visitor, which also involved having to change GP surgery. As I look back and ask myself what went wrong, the more important question is why?

My previous health visitor had categorised my family as vulnerable and in need of additional help and support because of the risk factors she thought we possessed. At this point, I could write up a separate essay as to the definitions of 'help' and 'support' as it is clear that different people and services have differing definitions. All I can say is the service I received was anything but helpful and supportive. What I did receive was a series of belittling remarks, patronising (and incorrect) advice, condescending comments, and a level of incompetence coupled with a judgemental and prejudiced service that would be comical were this not such a serious matter with grave consequences. During the 13 months following the birth, what should have been a joyous time, filled with fun and happiness, was marred by the stress of being undermined, looked down upon, criticised and more sinisterly, having my parenting abilities placed under intense scrutiny.

During those 13 months, I was being set up to fail. Not once was it pointed out to me that I was being assessed. Much of what I said in confidence was twisted and later used against me. Much of the time, I was in a tails-I-lose- heads-I-don't-win situation. I have so many examples to cite, but the following more benign incidents serve as examples. Following the initial meeting at my home, my former health visitor requested that I attended clinics on at least a fortnightly basis, otherwise she would come to my home instead. As a result, I followed her instructions and attended the clinics on a weekly basis until my daughter was 12 weeks old and then fortnightly until she was six months old. Yet, when I filed a complaint against my former health visitor the following year, the fact that I had attended the clinics so often was used as proof that I required the level of intervention that I received! Then there was the time when I explicitly informed my previous health visitor that I would be away visiting relatives during two specific weeks in August, only to find out when I eventually obtained my case notes that she had phoned our home several times during one particular week when she knew we were away. She did not leave a message on the answerphone so we never knew she had tried to contact us. However, she did put a non-maternal contact on my notes, the implication being that we were purposely avoiding her.

I freely admit that I suffered from depression when I was 14 years old. The NHS treated my depression, for which I am forever grateful, as without the counselling I received I would not have had such a successful life. Nevertheless, I could have never foreseen that this episode of teenage depression, which lasted no more than a year, and required only counselling, would be considered a quarter of a century later as a risk factor for poor/bad parenting or attachment and postnatal depression.

I should perhaps mention how my former health visitor's rampages came to a halt. She made a medical diagnosis that she was not qualified to make and then lied by omission to a GP in order to bypass his examination and have my daughter fast-tracked for an unnecessary X- ray at 13 months old - with all the risks that possesses. That is when my father's friend (who is a GP in London) and a relative (who also used to work for the NHS but then retired) volunteered to give a second opinion. At that point, there was a stark change of attitude towards our family and our daughter no longer needed an X-ray. On the advice of my father's GP friend, we insisted on our daughter being examined by a local paediatrician. The paediatrician examined our daughter, said that she was one of the healthiest specimens he had seen walk

through the door and signed her off. We did not hear from that health visitor again, although by then we had already filed a formal complaint against her. Eventually, the Primary Care Trust (PCT) agreed to our request to change health visitor and we had to change GP surgery as well.

Six years on, the experience has had a profound effect on me - anyone who has experienced such character assassination as I have will know what I mean. To summarise the short-term effects, I have had to suffer the stress of a possible investigation into whether my husband and I are fit to be parents, the sense of injustice, the increased anxiety, the constant worrying that other people will believe the character assassination and, ultimately, the possible impact on our daughter. That first year, I was like the proverbial cat on a hot tin roof - nervous of doing anything 'wrong'.

I am a very strong person. However, the long-term effects although not problematic, are certainly regrettable - such as the inability to trust certain people and the inability to confide in people. I used to be an extroverted, bubbly, loud girl with an equally big mouth! Now, I am very much more introvert and I am less open and more withdrawn. I am more cautious of people and of what I say to them. I am suspicious when people ask me about our children and I do not divulge or volunteer any information. I avoid telling people which school our children attend, their ages, their likes or dislike, unless I know the person very well.

The side effects have not only affected me, but also my extended family. For example, following this health visitor nightmare, my parents - after almost 40 years of marriage - filed for divorce. And yes, I do hold my previous health visitor partially responsible for the breakdown of their marriage. My parents suffered as well. I have not lived with my parents for a long time but I can imagine the conversations and possibly the disputes brought on by my case.

The following advice will no doubt be scorned by the 'professionals', but if I knew back in 2004 what I know now, I would have given the health visiting service the widest of berths and ensured that I gave only the minimum amount of information possible to the health visitor. I learnt that, however nice the health visitor may initially appear, such information could be twisted and used against me at a later point. Furthermore, 'clearing' my name was an arduous and lengthy process - it took me over three years, but that is another tale. As far as the health visitor is concerned, she was seen last year selling ice creams and is no longer listed on the Nurses Register.