AIMS For a better birth...

My story

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Heather talks about creating memories of her son Raymond

Being a mother is all I have ever wanted to do, but the fates seem to conspire against me. My son was conceived after years of infertility and IVF.

Having finally achieved a pregnancy I felt in some ways I had a head start; I had subscribed to the Mother magazine since 2006 and been reading books and articles and on online sites; I already knew pregnancy and birth could be beautiful; I already knew my rights; I didn't have years of negative images and conditioning to undo. I often felt my pregnancy worked in reverse, starting out high tech and full of scans and needles and going to low tech as I employed an independent midwife to support me for my homebirth.

I didn't get my home water birth with candles and music. I had a hospital bed, epidural and purple pushing. But I'm still so glad I had nine months of looking forward to something lovely rather than fear.

My son Raymond was stillborn for reasons unknown. He had a good heart beat in the morning and was dead by the afternoon. I'm no expert in stillbirth. I'm still struggling to deal with it. But if anyone is interested I can share what I feel is most important for others to know from my experience.

Make pregnancy beautiful. I would say this is the most important thing that stillbirth teaches us. You might not go home with a baby, so don't wait for that reward. Enjoy the pregnancy. I don't know how I would have got through without being able to look back and treasure the memories of a lovely pregnancy. I had an independent midwife and it really helped to have lovely care that focused on the positive that wasn't aimed at scaring me, telling me what to do or making me feel guilty. I did so much to celebrate my pregnancy: yoga, belly casts, blessing way, baby shower, aqua aerobics, alternative therapies, NCT classes, and hypnotherapy. I wish everyone could have this kind of experience. No extra worry would have kept Raymond alive. I wish so much maternity care wasn't focused on getting mothers to worry.

Gather support. I am so pleased to have been part of the Positive Birth Movement. It has given me such a great connection to women who have really worked hard to support me. My birth partner was truly amazing. I have no idea how she did it, supporting me the whole time, never missing a beat during such an unexpected and distressing time. I wish I could order such a birth partner for every woman.

There are always ways to make birth more positive and it is always worth doing them. As soon as we got

onto the delivery suite my midwife and birth partner took down the hospital curtains. I hated those curtains from staring at them during my husband's cancer treatment and death, it helped enormously to have them removed and also to feel that I had some control in an uncontrollable situation, that I had birth partners who would challenge the protocol to give me what I needed. Every little thing counted and makes me proud. We had my wedding photos and altar items where I could see them during labour. I insisted on not having drips in both hands so I didn't feel too trussed up; I told the doctors not to discuss politics during my birth; I wore a pretty sundress to labour in. The epidural wore off enough to feel him coming out, and I saw his sex for myself; I had skin to skin and time to hold him and I carried him to the Teardrop room in my sling. These things matter.

The staff and facilities at my hospital were also amazing. We had access to a special suite with double bed, kitchenette and more home-like facilities as well as a cold cot to keep Raymond with me; my parents could stay with me; my friends visited; we had Wi-Fi so I could communicate with friends, but most of all the attitude of the staff was brilliant. I was never once made to feel that even a small request, like paper to write on or a cup of tea, was less important than other work they could be doing with living babies whose outcomes could be changed. I had as much time as I needed with Raymond and had no pressure to leave him before I was ready. I can't imagine how much more difficult this time would have been without this.

Mementoes are good but aren't memories. I almost hesitate to write this part, as I fear I may feel differently from other parents. I am enormously grateful for the photos, prints, memory boxes etc. I have, but to me these aren't memories. Memories are the time I had with my living son. This is a record to his body. At times I felt almost rushed, being given the memory box even before Raymond was born, time alone with Raymond was very important. But I am glad for the beautiful photos I have - a lovely way to share my son with the world. Finally, don't assume a woman knows about after-care. I'm fairly sure people talked to me in the hospital - I have no idea what they said. I was given Sands leaflets and these were really helpful as they let me access the information when I could cope, but really I needed people to get in touch later and talk about counselling and other support when I could listen.