AIMS For a better birth...

Poppy's story

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Poppy Johnson talks about her decision to birth at home and how it was supported

I knew from the moment I saw the little blue line on the pregnancy test that I wanted a home birth, but I'm not small (I'm not sure how flattering I find the term 'borderline obese' but I suspect it is clinically accurate) and my family has a history of high blood pressure and diabetes, so I worried that I would be up against some opposition to my plans.

My booking appointment was a nightmare, where I felt that I was being steered down a path of damagelimitation and that all I was facing was closed doors – I hadn't even mentioned my wish for a home birth. The assessment seemed totally focused round my weight and how that could affect the size of my baby, how that could mean my labour would be long and painful, how my baby might get stuck half-born, how I might bleed heavily....

However, after a long and tearful phone call with a local doula, I decided to hire her and get better informed. I sought out care from an independent midwife, hoping that would widen my options, but, after talking to several, I felt that hiring a midwife who lived more than two hours away wasn't going to get me the support I wanted either, so I decided to stick with my local NHS team and make sure that I got my emotional care and antenatal preparation from my doula.

By my next appointment I was feeling much more confident, and I fairly bombarded my midwife with questions and plans for making a birth in hospital as close to what I wanted as possible. I was stunned when she said, 'it sounds like you have done your homework, have you thought about birthing your baby at home? You will have much more freedom to make your own decisions that way.' I could have hugged her. That is just what I needed to hear.

I began to make plans, lists and lists of lists. My doula lent me all the AIMS books on her shelf, a stack of magazines and some really good articles on bigger mamas, and I met little real resistance to my home birth from then on. My community midwife (not the one I'd seen at the GP booking clinic) was supportive, telling me what risks or objections I might hear, and suggesting I read up and work out what I wanted for each of them. She kept telling me what the local policy was, but then reminding me that I was free to decide if I wanted to go that route or not. I felt like it was totally my decision. I'm sure having a doula helped me to go to those appointments feeling confident and sure of my knowledge, and that meant I could ask for what I wanted knowing just what I was requesting and why. I don't think you can underestimate the power of being sure in your choices.

I had intended to decline the glucose tolerance test, based on all I had read about the risks of being overweight, having a big baby and how our bodies process sugar, but somehow I felt that I should pick my battles. I was certain that, although I'm large, I eat a healthy diet and get plenty of exercise and fresh air, I would not be diagnosed as diabetic. The results came back totally normal. I now feel wiser though because the test was truly awful. That amount of sugar on an empty stomach made me feel sick and peculiar, and interestingly that was my only remotely high blood pressure test of my whole pregnancy. Next time I will definitely say, 'Thanks but no thanks.'

When my waters went, in the early hours of the morning, at 40+9, I called the maternity unit, and was calmly told that I should call back when my labour had been strong for at least a couple of hours, and that I perhaps should try to sleep if nothing much was happening. Sleep? No way. I was far too excited.

I niggled all that day, and as it started to get dark the following evening my contractions really got going. After a couple of hours of having to concentrate on my breathing and not being able to talk through contractions I called my doula and then my midwives. My doula arrived quickly. The midwives took a lot longer, which was good for me – I had been warned that might happen as they could be coming from some distance and they would meet up and come together. When they arrived they were lovely and very respectful of my birth plan which my doula shared with them before they came into my space. All was calm and peaceful, everyone sat drinking tea whilst I wandered my house, stopping every now and then for a contraction to pass. I thought I was still very early as I was not even slightly yelling for drugs. I declined vaginal examinations and listening to my baby's heartbeat, and I didn't hear either mentioned again.

After about two hours (which feels both like two minutes and two days at the same time) of incredibly intense contractions and blissfully restful gaps my beautiful, 8lb 2oz, pink and squawking daughter emerged in one huge, triumphant, animalistic push, followed not long afterwards by her placenta. Then it was all over, and very soon we were happily tucked in bed, breastfeeding and eating toast, with no drama, just pure joy.