AIMS For a better birth...

When midwives lie

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Hannah Gray recounts how a health professional misused Social Services

After four miscarriages and countless investigations we had given up hope of having a third baby and were happily surprised when I got, and stayed, pregnant.

During the pregnancy we had some concerns about our midwifery care with Luton and Dunstable University Hospital. There was no single issue, but there were niggles that our choices weren't respected and we should just let them tick boxes and follow their plan. We didn't want to cause any problems and decided to not make a fuss – we were informed, articulate and clear on our choices and trusted that it would work out OK.

Unfortunately it didn't.

The midwife who attended our home birth stopped my labour with her unprofessional behaviour. She appeared unable to cope with our informed choice to use water and to have a hands-off labour. At one stage she shouted at me, her nose almost touching mine, as I breathed through a contraction. She threatened to withdraw care unless I consented to internal examinations and dismissed our birth plan without reading it. It was so unpleasant that I went upstairs in tears, leaving my husband and mother to agree an alternative care plan if labour re-started.

When labour re-started it was fast; both of my previous labours were under an hour. I birthed our son in the pool in our living room supported only by my husband, with paramedics arriving seven minutes later. It was intense but beautiful. Despite multiple calls to labour ward flagging my history, on-call midwives weren't contacted initially, only arriving half an hour after our son was born.

In the days afterwards we considered complaining but decided to focus on our family – we had a healthy child and, despite everything, a positive birth experience. We spent three wonderful weeks in a bubble of happiness – our family was complete and we felt incredibly blessed.

There were concerns –we weren't discharged from midwifery care, we had a strangely intense visit from a senior health visitor, and our community midwife turned up suddenly and virtually snatched our notes out of our hands before dashing off again. All these were explained away and my husband was certain I was being paranoid.

Unfortunately I wasn't.

Out of the blue we received a call from Social Services with instructions to present our son immediately for a medical examination. They had received serious allegations that we had violently harmed our child, we had deliberately birthed without midwives present and we were keeping our son from medical care. We discovered that the midwife who had left us and never seen our son had made these unfounded malicious allegations. Our son has extensive birthmarks and had been checked by the hospital paediatric team and our GP, on the advice of community midwives, in the week after his birth.

At 7pm on a Friday night he was subjected to an emergency medical with Social Services present. No signs of abuse were identified. The doctor confirmed the diagnosis of birthmarks already made by the hospital and our GP.

We tried to contact the midwifery team to understand why they had made these allegations and were told we would never find out who had made the referral. They then tried to hide the identity of the person and how the allegation had come about.

We later discovered that, after initial allegations of violent harm were dismissed, every time Social Services prepared to dismiss the case for lack of evidence, allegations of increasing seriousness were made by members of the midwifery team. Meetings were held without our knowledge where different healthcare professionals lied, exaggerated and misused information to create a body of evidence to force Social Services to investigate.

Social Services were left with no choice but to under take a full child-at-risk investigation. It is an incredibly intrusive process. Our older children had to be interviewed. We were interviewed separately about the intimate details of our relationship, our financial situation, our family relations. The children's clothes, bedding and toys were checked, the contents of our fridge examined.

We spent a weekend frantically cleaning our house before the inspection, trying to make things perfect. During the course of that weekend my tear re-opened but our midwifery team would provide no support and discharged us by a text message.

I cried almost continually.

I would wake and for one moment think I had had a nightmare, only to realise that we really were caught up in this ghastly process.

I would panic when an unexpected visitor arrived.

My husband spent nights awake researching our position and what we could do to protect our children. He was devastated that he was powerless to stop the hurt being inflicted on our family.

I hit bottom when I learnt that Social Services were told that I was a risk to my children due to previous postnatal depression. I have never had PND. People I had trusted were making ever more incredible unfounded allegations to prove I was unfit to mother my children. I remember handing the baby to my

husband and, in tears, getting my coat to leave. I couldn't see how I could stay – it didn't matter what was true. People were determined to break up our family and would say whatever it took. I remember my husband saying I couldn't go, that he understood why I wanted to walk and walk, but we had to persevere and prove the allegations were untrue.

After six long weeks the investigation was complete. The final report that concluded we were good, loving parents caring appropriately for our children and that we had not harmed them in any way. However, the allegations remain on file and can never be deleted.

What we hadn't realised was that closing the case was just the beginning. It would take us another year of fighting to get the allegations accepted as untrue and retracted.

We requested copies of our notes from every party we had encountered – hospital, GP, health visitors, Social Services. Each request required a set of forms and a cheque. The cost of getting a photocopy of your notes is supposed to compensate for the costs incurred. In our experience the cost is set so high as to dissuade you from getting copies. We spent over Â£200 to get the copies but we needed those files to prove the lies.

We also requested a copy of the Social Services records including meeting notes and call records. This provided an independent third-party record of who was involved and what had been said.

I found writing my complaint letter incredibly upsetting. We knew that any complaint had to be free of emotion but I had to relive the experience and lies as I wrote it down.

The response we received from the hospital was awful. It dismissed all of our complaints, accused my husband of illegally acting as a midwife when he supported me in the absence of medical care, and made further allegations that our son had been 'immobile' at birth and that we had so violently harmed him that he had suffered 'skeletal damage'. It took a bad situation and made it worse. The response didn't even agree with written notes we had obtained.

It took hours of work to lay out clearly what was wrong with this response. We compiled a lengthy document which outlined each of the untrue statements and factual inconsistencies, cross referenced against the records from Social Services and the medical notes.

We put to one side the complaint about unprofessional midwifery care during labour because it seemed to come down to a 'she-said, you-said' situation and, as parents, our position was considered less credible than that of a professional who made unfounded malicious accusations.

After our rebuttal was sent I received a phone call from PALS. The tone of the call was so aggressive and prohospital that I was left sick and shaking. I was told we would have to come in for a meeting to discuss our letters.

At this point we were lucky enough to have Beverley Beech agree to advocate for us – we knew that any meeting would be confrontational and we needed someone who could be impartial to support us.

We spent hours preparing for the meeting. We had two lever-arch files of paperwork to support us, cross referenced and highlighting the 34 untrue statements made by the midwives.

On the day, my mother, husband, Beverley and I attended a meeting. The hospital had just as many people on their side of the table.

The hospital attitude from the start was dismissive. They offered to apologise for a birth experience that didn't match my expectations. I'm proud that I responded that my son's birth was incredibly positive and empowering but the unprofessional behaviour of their team in making unfounded malicious allegations against us of violent harm and their subsequent lies had hurt my family hugely and that was what we were there to discuss.

Over the next three hours we refuted every lie, every suggestion that we were at fault, backed by the evidence we had collected. Every time we asked them to show support for the statements made by their staff they couldn't. It was harrowing. We had to fight our corner and lay out the evidence that the internal investigation should have discovered.

The most disturbing part was how the wider team had closed ranks and lied, shared incomplete information and failed to even consider our welfare – 'punishing' us through Social Services seemed to be their sole objective. Social Services recorded that one midwife had told them 'that is not the outcome we wanted' when told there was no evidence of any harm and the investigation would close.

Eventually the hospital conceded that there had been a series of unfortunate events and a breakdown in procedure and that the allegations were unfounded, based on untruths and should never have been made.

Despite this it took another two months for the hospital to finalise a letter which states that for each of the 34 lies told about us the statement was incorrect and should not have been made. We received a watered down apology but those involved did not directly apologise or take responsibility for their actions and the hurt caused. This letter is attached to the front of our Social Services file.

We were promised that changes would be made, that training would be under taken to address the failings of care and procedure. We know from other local families that this has not happened.

I now understand why other families don't complain about poor midwifery care. The process is set up to be costly in financial, time and emotional terms. The process assumes the health care professionals must be right and families in the wrong. I am not sure, knowing now how much of a toll it took on us and our family to make the complaint, that I would do it again.

I started the complaint process only wanting the individual involved to apologise for her actions, take responsibility for the hurt caused and commit to never do this again. The response we have doesn't do

that and certainly does not address the harm done to my family by the allegations made against us and the lengthy, combative process we had to go through to get the lies retracted.