AIMS For a better birth...

Health visitors

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Sarah Holdway shares her experience of the strong arm of the health police

I'm no stranger to cancelling health visitors. I've had five children and over the years I have seen less and less of them, until baby three when I declined entirely.

By the time I had my fourth I had let the midwifery team know my plans to decline visits and to freebirth. I did just this and welcomed baby four into the world one snowy morning. A week later the bumph arrived with details of all the services available locally. Once more a short letter to say, 'no thank you,' and not a further peep. This, to me, is how it ought to be; I am making an informed choice and the constant barrage of 'safeguarding' is now getting far too Big Brother for my liking. Reading AIMS material recently I have to agree with 'The spy with the smile' (AIMS Journal, Vol: 16 No: 3 p4).

Recently, I had my fifth baby and this time we had been travelling I declined to let anyone know and we had our baby in the small hours in our caravan. Life trundled on, and one evening a police officer arrived on the doorstep with a social worker. My blood ran cold. I invited them in and they asked if there was a baby on the premises. I pointed to the snoozing baby and they asked various questions; 'child trafficking' was cited. Luckily, the social worker was aware of freebirth and very open to people who make their own choices, so after an hour-long conversation about our life and how we live it, they left full of apologies.

Throughout, they both looked confused and perplexed exchanging many glances asking me the same questions over and over, and they seemed shocked we had a birth certificate. The policeman interjected at one stage to say they had reports we had arrived with a baby trying to register her.

She did mention that there was a chance that an assessment would be required as new guidelines had come about that every child referred should be assessed, to avoid past mistakes.

I waved them goodbye and crumpled into tears; I felt terrified. My world was rocked. For days I replayed it all,. Did I say the right thing? What if they did assess? What if a different social worker decided we were wrong, somehow that our baby isn't in her best place; what if they decided to take her? What about the rest of the children? So many 'what ifs' rolled through my mind, I barely slept. Even now, a few weeks later, I feel so invaded.

I sought advice and have begun the process to get my file to find out what provoked a visit. While I waited, a few things emerged, the first being a letter from the health visitor team informing us of an appointment just a few days away. I called to cancel, to be met with much resistance. The 'chirpy bully' is

how I term these people; they insist and insist with sweet little phrases. I felt rather threatened in a way because I could barely get a word in edgeways, with 'we won't be very long', 'we'll just weigh babe quickly', 'make sure she's ok' and, when my insistence grew stronger 'is everything ok?', 'we can help'. In between my every 'no thank you, I am cancelling, I have no desire to see a health visitor,' she had another pop-up answer. She insisted I had to see them, until I had to raise my voice and say 'I am very aware of my rights thank you, I decline to see you, please cancel'. I then followed up with a letter declining the service.

I felt furious! Why can my wishes not be met? Why is not wishing to meet the team regarded with such deep suspicion? Do they genuinely believe a mother or father is not a capable person without a 'health professional' giving the ok? Or do they feel so pressured from superiors to conform?

A chance conversation with a receptionist opened up further murky corners - a health visitor had called the caravan site demanding information; the receptionist declined to tell her anything, explaining it was not in her remit to divulge personal information. This caused the health visitor to telephone the police and Social Services- just three hours later they were in reception, asking questions such as did we visit the complex and had I been seen whilst pregnant, suggesting they were concerned because I hadn't seen the health visitor. The receptionist answered their questions and pointed them to where we stay.

This leads me to trust them even less. A message could have been left with reception for me to call if the health visitor was so worried, rather than utilise the police and Social Services - I'm still waiting to find out what she told Social Services; maybe I will never know what was said and what was truly thought.

Whilst a part of me is glad that if they truly believed a child was in danger they acted quickly and the social worker that arrived was a genuine warm, decent person, this could have gone very awry and run away with itself. I am sure there could have been a better way to deal with it.

Tuesday arrived, the day of the appointment - I decided to go out and leave my partner here to see if they arrived; nobody turned up.

Lots of thoughts ran through my mind - I could just see them to sate their concerns but I see no real reason to, I don't want to see them, I know my children are thriving, I don't need anyone to decide this for me.

I'm tired of feeling forced to comply, seeing women saying they don't want to see a health visitor and other 'professionals' but fear the backlash. One lady I spoke to here in town said to me she had to go, because she had to see the health visitor for a lecture; her eyes rolled. We had got chatting because she was breastfeeding, she told me that it's not something 'they' encourage and she feared being reported if she refused to go. It seems the tools that 'health care professionals' use, Social Services for starters, are wielded every time someone does not conform. If this carries on, what next? Mandatory visits? Is it any wonder social workers are overworked and missing genuine cases, when they seem to be called out willy-nilly.

This is not what Social Services are for, they are there to help children who need real help, not to make parents comply.