AIMS For a better birth...

Why we need care for all

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Nerea Pla Domench shares her experience as a volunteer midwife in Eko Station refugee camp

At the last meeting of ENCA, the European Network of Childbirth Associations a Spanish representative, Jesusa Recoy, suggested that every country should establish, as Spain has done, an Observatory of Obstetric Violence, so that examples of poor practice can be collected and exposed. This is an example of the 'care' some migrants receive in Greek obstetric units (and our Greek contacts tell us that this kind of 'care' is not uncommon).

Around 11am, M calls me, his wife's waters have broken and she has just gone to the medical post to be taken to hospital. It's her first baby, she's frightened and he's nervous. I follow the ambulance in the car with a colleague, but we're not welcome at the hospital. We wait with M in the corridor whilst staff come and go. At M's request, I ask if I can go in with her and they reply that first the doctors have to see her: everybody seems really angry here.

After a long while, a woman, supposedly a midwife, asks me about the waters breaking and when the contractions started, they tell me she has a closed cervix and they're going to do a caesarean. I suggest walking up and down for a while, but I'm told that they don't do that there. The doctor adds that it's dangerous because having broken waters, she could have a prolapsed cord. I wonder how the cord could get through a closed cervix, it seems absurd, but I smile, and say, 'ok, ok, can I go in?' Finally, 'Yes!' They let me go in and hold B's hand. She's looking terrified, I look into her eyes, we breathe through the contractions together and she calms down. Five minutes later they throw me out of the room, saying 'Spanish midwife, go out' – they're going to examine her again. After this, they don't let me go back in again at all.

When B goes to the toilet, M, my colleague and I make the most of the chance to be with her, standing at the toilet door, almost stealthily, M looks at her with tenderness and she looks scared and in pain. At that moment a picture of a prison scene comes into my mind.

She goes back into the room and we give her words of comfort, in a language she doesn't understand, (she speaks Arabic and we don't). She is alone. I'm frightened that they'll take B away without letting us know so we watch carefully; the staff avoid catching our eye, we wait nervously. After a while we see a stretcher being brought and without saying anything to us, they take her away. M and I start running to catch up with them since nobody answers our question of where they're taking her. I'm running as though it's not real and I imagine that for M it's even worse.

When we manage to get close to the stretcher, the person pushing it says they are going to do a caesarean. We go off to have something to eat. I take a sandwich to M, who is waiting nervously. He doesn't want to move away from the spot in case he misses seeing his wife and daughter when they come out.

At 15:30 B comes out on the stretcher, half asleep. She doesn't know where the baby is and the person in charge of the stretcher is not very clear. We follow the stretcher, there isn't a curtain in the room or any other means of having some privacy for the three new mothers who sleep at hardly a meter's distance from each other. 'What about the baby?' Nobody answers. In the next door room there's a baby in one of the incubators. M looks lovingly at the baby, although he doesn't know if the child is his. I ask if the baby is B's daughter and nobody answers. It seems surreal and cruel to me. There are no words to describe my feelings at that moment. I can't imagine what the father is feeling; after a war, months in a refugee camp, the uncertainty, he's denied the joy of seeing his daughter. I can't think what it must be like for the mother, after all they've gone through. And those final hours of fear, pain and the frustration of not being able to follow the natural process of giving birth and then not being able to see her daughter and have her at her side. After several attempts we finally get an answer, 'Yes, she is B's daughter'.

What a relief! We look at the baby and wish her all the best whilst the father smiles at last: in spite of the situation, it's a beautiful moment. At last they know where their daughter is. After more than an hour a nurse, with a stern look on her face, puts the baby in the cot next to B's bed so that she can see her but not touch her and in a strict voice she tells M to leave her there. As soon as the nurse goes, the father puts the baby with the mother : the baby soon star ts sucking at the breast. I hope this scene is repeated hundreds of times, day after day, although I doubt it in this hospital in Kilkis. We know from experience that dry milk is automatically provided to all new mothers. A little later we leave them. The baby is back in the cot, B is resting and M is looking on with tender, loving care.

Nerea Pla Domench
Translated into English by Jan Adamson
Eko Station refugee camp is situated at Polikastro, in the
North of Greece