AIMS For a better birth...

Water Birth Mother Accused of Illegal Birth and Child Neglect

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Member Yasmin Sumpter writes about her experience

Being a member of AIMS and actively campaigning for the legal and human right to give birth the way one chooses, I recently gave birth to our daughter at home in a birth pool. In the preceding five months I was physically injured, intimidated, threatened and lied to by NHS midwives.

No NHS midwife attended my birth. As a consequence, but unsuccessfully, local midwives have since contacted police and social services falsely and vindictively accusing us of child neglect and of conducting an illegal birth. We understand the use of such fascist tactics is becoming increasingly common.

As we have been officially, deliberately and wrongly accused by local midwives of being irresponsible and neglectful, I do wish to explain our decision making process before we chose to birth our baby truly naturally at home as we had done three years previously with our son.

For a large majority of pregnant women and their babies (over 90%), irrespective of perceived risks, planned, low - intervention home births are the safest option with regard to mortality and morbidity incidences.

There is no current practice or policy carried out by the NHS on 750,000 pregnant women and their babies annually antenatally or during birth process that can be regarded as safe or aiding the birth process. During labour all routine interventions such as continuous foetal heart monitoring, the use of drugs, instruments, epidurals and operations completely impair the birth process causing high incidences of disability or even death in mother and baby. The same applies to other interventions such as frequent vaginal examinations, artificial rupture of the membranes or episiotomies (female genital mutilation).

Such unnecessary meddling and unsafe dangerous practice causes a chain reaction of dysfunction which then needs further counter active interventions and soon. There is general disarray, a dearth of training in non-obstetric, natural births and a current lack of any sense of vocation in the current midwifery service and also a high likelihood of catching infections.

Looking at the above facts, wanting only the very best for our unborn, we could only choose the safest option, i.e. a planned, non-interventionist home birth as responsible, caring parents, when I became pregnant again in May 2000.

However we now live in an area between Penzance and Truro that has a home birth rate of only 2.9% (including transfers), but with the nearest independent midwife a five hour car journey away, we had no option this time but to involve the NHS. Delivery in cars, lay-bys and ambulances is common place as the only and nearest maternity unit is a long way away.

In August we informed the supervisor of midwives that we were going to have a non - interventionist home water birth in January 2001 and could she therefore please make arrangements for a midwife who's trained and committed to attend us. We requested only basic care at our house (i.e. palpation of the fundus height and checking the baby's heartbeat with a Pinnard Stethoscope).

As alleged raised blood pressure measurements, or levels of glucose and protein in the urine are regularly used against non-compliant women in order to force them into accepting a hospital appointment or to deny their choice for a home birth, we decided to take my BP ourselves and to test my urine regularly and diligently.

After a long wait and several more letters from us, we were visited by the supervisor of midwives and a community midwife, as there were "certain policies" within the Royal Cornwall NHS Trust and matters really did need discussing. We were given the usual lipservice of how committed to home birth one was in this area, but how little demand there was (not true as more than half the women I talk to says she wanted a home birth but was not 'allowed' by the midwives).

Numbers of home births attended per midwife in this team are so small, that some of them in some years probably attend none and only do ante-natal and postnatal care. I hence raised the issue of safety for a labouring women and her baby, which must be jeopardised when they are attended by a midwife who hardly ever or never facilitates such births but is used to actively mismanage by all the aforementioned dangerous interventions in hospital.

I also shared my concerns of safety with regard to water births, with the last one in this area having taken place over two years ago. The water pool at Treliske Hospital in Truro has been dismantled despite high demand from women, who are told that they just can't have a water birth.

No one in the local team had been trained in non - intervention water births and only one midwife had, all together, seen but not necessarily facilitated four water births. The community midwife's response was that it was people like myself who didn't allow student midwives to observe home water births who are responsible for the small numbers in this area!

I was then subjected to the usual scare tactics of what I intended to do when I haemorrhaged, had placenta praevia or abruptio, "failed to progress" or my baby was "in distress". The risk of all these happening in a healthy pregnancy is extremely small, and I pointed out that they are mainly only consequences of the malpractice of interfering and meddling in a perfectly normal functional process.

Whilst it is a good idea to have risk management strategies in waiting just in case these low risk incidents

ever happened, it is extremely dangerous to use them routinely on every pregnant woman which is current policy. In other words, the NHS confuses hazard with risk and creates the very situations it claims to avoid.

We were further told that we were unlikely to know the attending midwife, especially if labour was at night, and that she was unlikely to be trained, familiar or confident in facilitating a non - interventionist birth under water at home, or to know our birth plan. We have learnt only this week of a case near by, where a labouring woman was attended by such an untrained midwife at her planned home water birth.

When the midwife realised that the women was not going to get out of the pool for the delivery (as she had stated clearly in her birth plan.) she said she could therefore not stay in attendance. Due to the understandable shock, labour completely stopped for two hours while a replacement midwife was summoned, causing obvious distress for mother and baby.

The outcome of this completely avoidable situation could well have been disability or even death for mother or baby. Also, we have anecdotal evidence of water births in this area conducted in the past having been completely messed up by sheer lack of competence, training and meddling, leading to transfer to hospital and turning them into high intervention obstetric nightmares.

My proposal to train the local team was turned down. Instead the supervisor proposed either she herself having had some experience of water births or the aforementioned local midwife would attend us personally no matter when my labour would start or how long it would take. This she gave her word on. We gladly accepted this compromise and asked for it to be confirmed in writing.

I then agreed to my first ante-natal check up by the community midwife who was clearly already irritated by my "non compliance". She brutally and painfully dug her hands with stretched out fingers deep into my pelvis down either side of my uterus which made my before so peaceful baby jump and leap.

This went on for about one minute, as she was pinching arms and legs trying to find a head, causing my baby and me considerable pain. In my previous pregnancy I had been cared for by a knowledgeable, experienced, independent midwife and the difference in professionalism could not have been crasser causing our three-year-old to shout at her "Don't squash the baby!"

Immediately after the visit I noticed my previously beautifully and securely suspended pregnant belly was now hanging low down. I was getting excruciating pains in the pubic bone area and my baby was feeling upset and unsettled. My uterus had obviously prolapsed as a consequence of this aggressive ante-natal examination.

At our next appointment with the midwife who supposedly had some experience in water birth and who had been assigned to us, it transpired that she had no idea about the compromise that had been agreed on previously. She was of the opinion we really should get an independent midwife and thought it highly unlikely she'd be present at our birth anyway.

She showed remarkably little knowledge of our interest in helping us achieve a non-interventionist home water birth. Alarmed, we phoned the Supervisor of Midwives who said there were a whole host of legal issues, especially after reading my birth plan (which was merely requesting a hands-off approach) on which she was taking the Trust's advice.

After the next dreaded ante-natal two weeks later, we discovered that the midwife had incorrectly recorded our baby as breech and my BP reading as 128/65 instead of 108/65, a giant leap from all previous readings. This could now well be misinterpreted as a first sign of pre-eclampsia. Also, the baby's size had been recorded as 27 weeks as opposed to the 30 (a sign of growth retardation?!)

When confronted she insisted she had taken my BP like this, while of course the reality is that no one except me has ever during my pregnancy taken my BP! She also did not explain why my baby supposedly had not grown since the first visit four weeks earlier.

Homeopathic treatment had by now corrected some of the damage to my uterus and the ligaments, and without it I am sure I would have miscarried.

At the following ante-natal the midwife measured the size of my baby again as two weeks behind schedule and "offered" me an antibody test, which I declined as the risk of spontaneous production of antibodies without provocation (e.g. injury to the placenta) is extremely small.

I was harassed and upset again about haemorrhaging, my baby dying etc., and I was told amongst others I would definitely not be "allowed" to labour as long as 18 hours (a normal and healthy period) and I'd be expected to get out of the water after each contraction in the second stage to have the baby's heartbeat checked. All of this is anathema to natural water births and guaranteed to impair the birth process.

Three months after first asking for support we finally received an answer from the Supervisor of Midwives completely going back on the compromise accepted by ourselves. Basically, I would be attended by any midwife on duty, therefore not trained, confident, experienced or enthusiastic about home water births, especially those strictly hands-off and natural. Attending midwives would do whatever their policies demanded, overruling my birth plan whenever they saw fit. I was also warned that my baby could be severely compromised due to me being RH-negative, which I found very upsetting.

Our efforts to remove all lack of clarity and possible areas of conflict before the birth so as to keep the birth room free of any aggression, threat of assault, intimidation or disharmony had come to nothing. Bearing in mind the low numbers of home births, the high transfer rates and the non-existent water births there really was, realistically, no chance for this baby to be born naturally, at home and without being hurt or maimed by the NHS midwives.

The final bombshell (of course anticipated by us) was dropped at my last ever ante-natal appointment at 34 weeks. The measuring tape hadn't even touched my belly, when the midwife exclaimed this baby really wasn't growing and with me being RH-negative, I was surely aware of the implication of her

findings. I should immediately have an antibody test and an ultrasound scan to confirm intra-uterine growth retardation (which ironically leads to caesarean operation).

Knowing all this was pure fabrication and instinctively feeling my baby was all right, I naturally declined, but was nevertheless scared, gutted and upset. No longer able to handle the stress we cancelled the next destructive antenatal and concentrated on constructive healthcare in the form of homeopathy and acupuncture instead, while also carrying on with diligent BP and urine testing.

We wrote a last desperate letter to the Trust spelling out our concerns for safety once more and asked again for the remaining time up to the birth to be used for training. Whilst naturally looking with trepidation towards having to meet the midwives again at the birth, I started to feel considerably better in their absence. The midwife had suggested I phone the switchboard on the day of the birth only when I was in clearly established labour, to ask who was on duty and depending on the answer to decide whether or when to call the NHS to our house.

Early on 17/1, shortly after midnight eleven days before my due date our beautiful, healthy baby daughter Sapphire Poppy made her safe entry into this world at home in the birth pool weighing 3000g. The birth was simply perfect, free of fear, nearly pain free and quick.

We could not have birthed our baby more safely and gently and my daughter and I were privileged to be let into the deep secret of creation and nature's wisdom while we gently facilitated each other's transformation into mother and babyhood respectively.

As a result our precious baby never had to endure any pain caused by standard birthing methods, and I as her mother never had to feel any disempowerment or grief from having failed to protect her from being interfered with, hurt or maimed. There is no shadow of a doubt in my mind that this is the way nature intended babies to be born. No midwife attended!

At the time I found it difficult to judge when I entered the second stage which really consisted of no more than about twenty contractions and therefore was extremely fast. There simply was no time to call the switchboard as the birth was requiring all my efforts and concentration. There also was no point calling straight after birth as everybody was well, happy and needed some sleep.

A midwife we hadn't met before later visited us. She said our little Sapphire looked lovely, completely healthy and was breastfeeding beautifully. A far cry from the growth retarded, jaundiced, severely compromised baby I was alleged to be carrying. Whilst pointing out we were welcome to postnatal care, she stressed that the option of doing so was entirely up to us. As our daughter was thriving beautifully and her cord had fallen off and healed already four days after birth we felt no need to arrange a further non-obligatory visit.

We were offered the Heel Prick Test by letter but, as the conditions tested for are extremely rare, one of them very unlikely to occur in vegan babies, we declined. The accompanying leaflet was sponsored by MILUPA (one of the biggest baby milk manufacturers, partly responsible for 1.5 million unnecessary

deaths of artificially fed babies in developing countries), we declined.

Then, on 31/1, we were visited without warning by a detective sergeant from the child protection unit and a woman from Social Services who had been alerted by the midwives that an "illegal birth" had taken place and that there were child protection issues at this address. Also, allegedly the baby had not been seen alive since birth.

Apparently, the midwives had called a meeting of paediatricians, doctors, police and social services without our knowledge, without writing to us with any supposed concerns or phoning us. Amongst other things, we were accused of not having registered our children with doctors and not having them immunised, neither of which is against the law and does not constitute child abuse or neglect.

Also, our daughter had at this stage already been seen alive and thriving by a homeopath and an acupuncturist, as well as of course friends and relatives. It is also not a legal requirement to call a midwife or GP during childbirth, and neither police nor social services had been informed about any of the issues and our active, unwelcome campaigning leading up to the birth.

They were genuinely very sorry to have upset me unwillingly, as they had been clearly, vindictively and deliberately misled as to what to expect. It was stressed verbally at the visit, later confirmed in writing and in phone calls, that the case is closed and that they most definitely do not share any child protection concerns with the NHS.

As these false accusations are very serious, and we don't know exactly what was said by whom we immediately requested our case notes from the NHS under the Data Protection Act. The NHS has since claimed not to have received such a request, and can not now find our records.

Seven weeks on I am still haunted by the vindictive accusations brought against us by the NHS prompting the visit. I have recurring nightmares of my baby being taken away from my breast, and her and my son being taken into care, and me being unable to protect them from this. Every knock on the door makes my legs go to jelly and my heart race with fear. What is stopping local NHS midwives from being vindictive for a second time to try and silence our campaign and to stop us from complaining about their lack of professionalism and dubious policies?

As for our contented, beautiful Sapphire-Poppy - it was all worth it, we did protect her, and perhaps have made it that bit more likely that she will be able to birth her babies without violence in years to come.