AIMS For a better birth...

Birth Story: My three very different experiences of becoming a mummy

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By Kirsten Mitchell

When I was little I wanted to be a midwife. I did well at school and went on to do my A-Levels. When I was 17 I applied to go onto a midwifery course but didn't get accepted and I was devastated. I decided college wasn't for me and got a job as a trainee building inspector. My parents were really disappointed and tried to talk me back into college. To please my Mum, I applied for the Project 2000 nursing course and got a place at Bury. My Mum and Dad were delighted but a little less so a month later when I told them I was pregnant. I was 19, and my dreams of being a midwife were replaced by the reality of becoming a mum.

I had a lovely pregnancy, although the baby was a little too comfortable and I was induced at 42 weeks. It was quite traumatic and after 42 hours in labour my baby became distressed and was born by emergency caesarean. He weighed a rather impressive 10lb 11oz. He was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, and I named him Sam. Even though I was a young mum, I was excited to be a mummy. I wanted to do everything right, I had really wanted to breastfeed, but no one spoke to me about it. My mum had been the first one to hold Sam whilst I was still in theatre, and she had been handed a bottle which she gave to him without question. Two days later I was up and about and I tried to get him latched on. I remember the midwife popping her head around the curtain and saying "Oh, look at you breastfeeding, clever girl". She didn't ask me how I was doing and the next day, with bleeding nipples, I asked for a bottle for him and that was that.

Maternity leave was very different 21 years ago, and when Sam was 5 months old I went back to work full time. Sam went to a childminder and my mum and dad helped out. I bought my first house when I was 22 years old. It was tough. I was skint but Sam and I were happy.

Six years later I met Gareth and two years after that we got married. Gareth wanted more kids but I was happy with Sam. I had a bit more money and we were able to get a car and go on holiday for the first time. But one morning I just woke up and thought "I want a baby now". After becoming pregnant accidentally with Sam I expected it to happen overnight. It didn't, it took nearly 4 years. Plus lots of tests and a few rounds of clomid.

In December 2011 I found out I was to be a mummy again. I had a lovely pregnancy, but this baby didn't

want to come out either. I was induced at 41 weeks and 5 days, and our baby girl arrived by ventouse with a little help from some surgical scissors. She was amazing, she was a little smaller than Sam at 8lb 12oz but she was the double of him. We named her Daisy. This time around it was different, the midwives were really supportive about breastfeeding and Daisy latched on the minute she was laid on my chest. I was over the moon. It wasn't plain sailing with Daisy's feeding though. As soon as we got home I started to struggle and Daisy didn't feed well. The support I had received on the postnatal ward at North Manchester wasn't reflected in the community and one midwife told me I should give up if it was making me feel so bad. Things got worse and Daisy was diagnosed with silent reflux. She was constantly crying and in pain. I gave up with the breastfeeding. I just couldn't cope. I was miserable and dreaded Daisy waking up for a feed. I put her on formula and she got worse. When she was 6 months old, Daisy was diagnosed with a severe allergy to cow's milk protein, she was prescribed a hydrolysed milk and she changed overnight. I finally had the happy smiling baby I knew Daisy was, and I started to enjoy her properly.

We talked about having another baby and we knew we would like one more. We also knew we could potentially have fertility problems again so we put it to the back of our minds as something we would talk about next year. The day after Daisy's 1st birthday I found out I was pregnant.

Everything was going well, we were excited if not a little shocked and I felt pretty good.

That Christmas whilst visiting my in-laws in Ireland I experienced some heavy bleeding, I was just over 22 weeks pregnant. I was admitted to the maternity unit at a small local hospital on Christmas Eve. The baby was happy and my scan was fine. I was kept in for 24 hours as a precaution. Two days later we sailed home, and I decided to get checked out at the Maternity Assessment Unit at North Manchester. I'm Rhesus negative, and as I was still bleeding a little I just wanted to be seen by someone at home. All was well and I was sent home. A week later I woke up to a pretty big bleed, I was 24 weeks pregnant. I rang the hospital and they told me to go straight to MAU. I wasn't too worried and I told Gareth to stay at home with Daisy and that I would ring him. The midwife checked the baby's heartbeat. All was well but she wanted the doctor to examine me "to be on the safe side". The doctor came in and examined me and I knew straightaway we were in trouble. The midwife very gently told me my cervix was dilated and she could see the baby's membranes. The next few hours are hazy, I remember ringing Gareth and being taken to the delivery suite, I remember somebody mentioning steroids for the baby's lungs, then they started talking about moving me somewhere else. I was confused. I remember thinking 'do they actually think the baby might come now, because they must be crazy, a baby doesn't arrive at 24 weeks because it would die and why would my baby die?!' Very soon, I was on my way to Oldham hospital. The next few days were crazy: labour ward, scans, plans, antenatal ward, change of plans, labour ward, antenatal ward again. The Neonatal team came to visit me: they explained what would happen to the baby after birth.

Everyone talked about what would happen to the baby when it arrived but no-one talked about what our role would be, particularly mine. I did at times feel a little out of the loop regarding my care. The midwives were busy. Other than to do my observations I saw very little of them.

Five days later my waters went. I asked for a section as I thought it would be easier on the baby. The consultant told me she didn't think it was worth the risk to me, as there was only a slim chance of our baby surviving. That was hard to hear. I was in labour for three hours. I was very lucky and was cared for by an amazing midwife, Sue. I don't know how she got me through the birth but I couldn't have done it without her. She was kind, caring, supportive and very calm.

The NICU team were in the room as they had promised, and our baby boy, Tom, came into the world feet first without a sound. He weighed 1lb 7oz. A lot of what happened next is a blur for me and it has taken a long time for me to able to process it. The only word I can use to describe Tom's birth is traumatic! I could see people working on my baby but I couldn't see him. I know I lost a lot of blood and I remember that Sue was very worried. Tom was resuscitated for quite a long time and I know that we came very close to losing him. I managed a little peep at him and then he was gone, whisked off to the place that would be our home for months.

I was totally unprepared for the neonatal unit, so many machines and beeps.

I was even less prepared for seeing Tom properly. He looked nothing like a baby: his skin was red and see through, his eyes were fused and he didn't look like he belonged to me. I didn't feel that instant rush of love that I had felt for my other two children. I didn't want to pick him up and snuggle him. I felt fear and pity. Pity for him, this poor little person going through unimaginable intervention. I felt broken.

Physically, I was pretty well after Tom's birth, although I was bleeding pretty heavily and kept asking the midwives to check, as I was sure it was too much. They insisted it was normal and they spoke to me about going home. I couldn't believe it! We had spent 5 days locked away in our little safe haven on the antenatal ward, only letting my Mum & Dad and my kids visit us and now they wanted me to go out into the world where everyone was carrying on as normal. I was shell shocked. However, I went home and I was glad to get back to my other kids, and my bed. I soon got into the routine of balancing expressing, spending time with the other two and being at the hospital every minute I could.

Tom was doing pretty well, or at least was stable. He did have some problems with his lungs and when he 12 days old he was moved to St Marys. This was hard for me. It was strange hospital and I missed the staff at Oldham. However the staff at St Marys were great and I got my very first cuddle when he was two weeks old. Tom began to have a fairly smooth ride at last. Of course we had many setbacks and he gave me lots of 'heart attacks'.

I was still bleeding heavily. I had seen the community midwife who insisted it was normal as I was expressing. [Ed: It is possible that this advice was based on the notion that retained placenta was unlikely given Kirsten's success with expressing milk, as placenta retention can negatively impact milk supply.]

When Tom was 9 weeks old, I told his nurse that I was having to change my pad every hour. She marched me straight down to antenatal and I asked for a scan. Unfortunately the scan showed retained placenta, and two days later I had surgery. It was stress I could have done without and I did feel a little angry that I hadn't been taken seriously.

Tom came home after 127 days in neonatal care. He was on home oxygen and it was hard. I was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and my mental health saw some dark times. It has been a long road and the scars remain but I am in a good place now. Tom is doing so well. He is happy and healthy and he starts school in September. I could never find the words to thank the all people who were involved in our journey and given us the chance to watch our little boy grow up. I feel blessed to have my three very wonderful children.

A year after Tom was discharged from the neonatal unit, Kirsten set up Spoons, a parent support group for other families using neonatal care services at Oldham and North Manchester hospitals. Spoons is a registered charity - see their website at https://www.spoons.org.uk/ for more information. Kirsten also now sits on the parent advisory group for the Greater Manchester Neonatal Network with some of the people who were responsible for Tom's care.