AIMS For a better birth...

A story of three births

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Chloe Bayfield shares the story of her journey to empowered motherhood

So I have had three gorgeous baby girls by caesarean, despite following an almost identical path of "high risks" each pregnancy was in no way similar to the others. I got a little older along the way, more active and my diet improved a little, but I did not change enough to warrant such a difference, especially given the omnipresence of said risks.

With all three of my babies I had a combination of a long list of "high risks" including: high blood pressure, suspected gestational diabetes, breech baby, large baby small mummy, oedema, polyhydramnios and long pregnancies (up to 43 weeks). How is it possible that these things have resulted in my having a long protracted hospital stay, medication and a battey of tests followed by an automatic caesarean in one pregnancy? Whilst another such scenario was surrounded by little to no tests and a long natural labour at home?

Such has been my childbirth journey, I had to stop at A in order to get to C, and I have to make my peace with that because it has brought about a lot of positive changes in my life. What scares me to death is the future of other pregnant, hormonal and vulnerable mothers. Should they not be made aware that whilst they are well within their rights to choose path A with all its long term ramifications, there are other options?

My first two pregnancies were two years apart at different hospitals, though only ten miles apart. The first at Southmead, one of the county's leading maternity units and the second at St Michaels. My first pregnancy flagged all of the above risks, apart from the breech complication, though probably because I only got to 38 weeks. I therefore spent much more time in hospital or seeing consultants than I did my midwife.

I spent the entire pregnancy being scared, told my baby was huge, my blood pressure was soaring, my frame was tiny, my sugar levels would surely be having a detrimental effect on my baby (at no point did they look at my diet). It was my first baby and I was petrified anyway, when they said take medication to help with the blood pressure I fell on it gratefully. When they said have a casaerean I bit their hands off. They explained that the chances of me birthing my baby were very slim, that even if I did I would rip and tear, adding that I would have stitches somewhere why not choose to have them on my stomach, much more comfortable! Cut to a ten day hospital stay in a room with no window, postnatal depression and a short stint of breastfeeding.

Pregnancy number two was very different. My booking midwife was happy with my plan to birth naturally this time (I had no idea how rare this is at the time) and didn't seem fazed by my previous pregnancy complications. I asked for a natural birth without having done any research, it was born only from my overwhelming desire to never have another caesarean.

This time round when my blood pressure went up I went into the day assessment unit but was home within a few hours. When I enquired about medication they informed me that they didn't give it as they didn't feel it was safe. After the first glucose tolerance test I refused the second and improved my diet. They weren't worried about my baby looking large on the numerous scans and didn't bat an eyelid when my pregnancy approached the 43 week mark. I think I saw one consultant throughout the pregnancy.

Then my little girl turned breech and it was game over, into the operating theatre two days later. Cut to a very very long recovery process with an even shorter breastfeeding stint and post natal depression. I had recurring mastitis and scar infections, a tooth abscess, bronchitis and sinusitis within the first month.

It took me eight years to feel ready for the next baby. Having watched my other two grow I decided that it was worth going through all of the above again to have another. My booking midwife was the same lady I had with my first baby. She told me that there was no way I would be allowed a VBAC attempt, she scheduled in my glucose tolerance tests and an appointment to book the caesarean. I got to about 20 weeks and then my wonderful sister in law gave me her AIMS Am I Allowed and VBAC books. Even writing this I can feel the weight of the other two births lift, this was the turning point. Just two little books.

I rushed back to my midwife, I was so excited, I told her what I had found out and explained my plans to have a home birth. She didn't share my excitement, luckily I knew this may happen and had taken my husband. She told me how the chances were both baby and I would die, she cited times when she had witnessed such a thing. Even with the little reading I had done at that point I could see the flaw in her argument, but that's another story. My husband was my hero that day, after every scare story he said 'We understand, but this is our choice, please can you write it in the notes' whilst I quietly cried. I then tentatively mentioned my research into independent midwives. My NHS midwife explained that an independent midwife would tell you she would help with any birthing scenario as she wanted your money. She went onto relate a story of an independent midwife trying to revive a still born baby with

homeopathic remedies.

Enter the wonderful independent midwife. A very experienced lady who has been a midwife since before I was born. Whenever I mention her name to anybody within the birthing world I hear another positive story. We met and I instantly felt I could trust her, she looked at my history carefully and felt I could achieve my goal. There was also an acknowledgement of the potential risks, which I was very happy with; I didn't just want to pay to hear what I wanted. Finally, somebody who knew what they were doing and supported my choices. All the worry fell away and I could finally just enjoy being pregnant.

I am at my happiest when I'm pregnant, I am content and at peace. Unlike my normal state of impatience, worry and frustration! I even love the last part when you are so huge you feel like you might fall over, and I do tend to get fairly big. This time round I wasn't poorly, I wasn't a patient, I was pregnant. My appointments were held at my midwife's home and I grew to love it there, it was like a safe little cocoon. I looked forward to them instead of dreading them. I can honestly say that my third pregnancy was one of the happiest most peaceful periods of my life.

My blood pressure went up a bit, but we (WE!) watched for other signs of anything being awry and, as there weren't any, let things be. It was also acknowledged, for the first time, that my blood pressure had been fairly high on booking, meaning that the rise itself wasn't huge. Same with my sugar levels, large baby, going post-dates, all fell within the normal remit of my pregnancy. Instead of automatically ticking some box somewhere and then trundling off down the road marked intervention, my midwife acknowledged that this was how pregnancies ran for me. Not to say for a moment that she wasn't watching for anything worrying, it was just done without worrying me unnecessarily. I respected her experience and trusted her, whilst she respected the natural process of growing a baby.

Baby number three did also turn breech at around 41 weeks, but instead of the world falling around my ears we altered my birth plan accordingly. Having read a fair amount of Mary Cronk's work, and discussed it with my midwife, I was happy that this was just a variation of a natural birth and certainly something I could handle. My little girl did turn head down again at about 42 weeks though.

Then came the labour, something I had never done before. The anticipation of 'will today be the day' was amazing, for the first time I was ready to give birth. As I said, I love being pregnant and don't usually want the pregnancies to end, but going into labour naturally meant that for the first time I got to a point where I did want baby to come. I got grumpy, restless and impatient and I love that I did! The weekend I spent labouring at home with my husband was one of the most amazing weekends we have ever experienced.

We watched TV; I got in and out of the bath and the pool, my midwife popped in to check me periodically. We were in a little bubble all of our own, sharing the most amazing experience. I know my midwife came, and I was reassured by her intermittent presence and phone calls, but she wasn't really in the bubble, if that makes sense... Which is exactly how I wanted it, it was just my husband and I, though with some wonderful support there, ready if we needed it.

Unfortunately after a long labour my little girl didn't want to be born naturally and we did end up with

another caesarean. But that is OK. I went into that operation on a high, I had achieved something amazing, and for the first time in any pregnancy I felt euphoric. My baby had chosen her own birthday, we had both experienced labour and all its benefits, I was ecstatic.

Cut to a very short and uneventful recovery followed by a long stint of breastfeeding. Notice the complete absence of postnatal depression and observe the palpable bond between mother and baby.

How can three almost identical pregnancies be so entirely different? How is it OK that two left me doubting myself, my mothering skills and my life choices whilst one enriched every aspect of my life? How do we address the balance and protect future mothers from unnecessary pain?

Chloe Bayfield