AIMS For a better birth...

A positive induction during Covid-19

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My last week of work as a teacher before starting maternity leave was spent working from home as that same week vulnerable people, including pregnant women, were advised to start social distancing due to coronavirus. Luckily, my colleagues and boss had already advised me to work at home as much as possible the week before to avoid schools and offices where I'd be in contact with large numbers of people. It was unfortunate that I didn't get to say goodbye to colleagues (I wouldn't be returning to this role after maternity leave) and we couldn't have a final team lunch but I knew it was the sensible option.

My first week of maternity leave was when lockdown was announced. I often felt frustrated as I couldn't leave the house to pick up the last bits and pieces we needed for baby arriving, but almost relieved that the decision had been made for me. Luckily, very kind family and friends chipped in and we were well stocked up on all the essentials. My husband, Stuart, was still working on a large building site and we were becoming increasingly worried about him being at risk and bringing it home. He decided that week to stop work and his boss kindly allowed him to self isolate knowing I was getting induced the following week. That was a big load off our minds.

I was booked in to be induced at 39 weeks for medical reasons. I always hoped to avoid induction but as the date drew closer we decided that it was actually better to know the time and date and be prepared due to the current situation. We knew no partners were allowed until active labour and no visitors to the ward afterwards so we had been mentally preparing for that. I really hoped my induction would be fast so

I wouldn't be by myself for too long, but I knew that Stuart would be there for me as soon as I really needed him, plus lots of friends had advised how partners can sometimes get in the way and annoy you anyway! In terms of visitors afterwards I was never very keen on anyone other than Stuart and our parents so although he wouldn't be there I wasn't too concerned about it. I also kept thinking, I've never done this before so really I won't know any better!

I arrived at hospital at 2pm on the 31st, had my first pessary at 6pm, mild contractions started at 9pm and when examined at midnight was told I was ready to go to the Labour Suite! I was so relieved because I had been very nervous that my induction would be a long-drawn-out affair and I'd have to go it alone. I phoned Stuart at 1am on my way down and he was there 20 minutes later. Despite the swift induction, labour was a bit more stop-start and further complicated when I spiked a temperature and I was advised to have IV antibiotics (subsequently it was found that I did have an infection). Emma was eventually successfully delivered by forceps at 4:11pm. We knew we had some time together as a family before Stuart would be asked to leave but luckily we had much longer than we thought we would get! Emma had to go and get antibiotics too so that extended our time a bit and then we were just waiting for a bed on the ward, which didn't happen until midnight! We were both shattered but delighted to get all that time together before Stuart had to leave.

The staff on the ward were fantastic. I didn't know what to expect but it was genuinely 24-hour non-stop care of the very best kind. You could see the extra work that changing PPE between each birthing person was adding to their workload but everything was done with a smile ... you may not be able to see them behind the masks but you could see it in their eyes and hear it in their voices.

Because there were no visitors, the ward had a lovely, calm atmosphere and all the ladies were sitting up in the day, curtains open and chatting away. I can't imagine how it would be with visitors coming and going all the time. We were all helping one another out, fetching things from bags for those who had had an epidural or caesareans or shushing babies while mums went to the loo or for a shower. There were tears and cuddles and lots of solidarity, mums looking out for each other, sharing stories, drying tears, having laughs!

Because of my infection I was on IV antibiotics and Emma was also being treated. In the end we stayedfor 4 nights. I phoned and messaged, sent photos and videos to friends and family and really I think it was worse for Stuart and our families who were worrying about us, than myself and Emma who were being so well looked after. I think our time together in hospital helped me get to grips with being a new mum really quickly. We settled in to our little bay and the hospital routine quickly. There were always staff on hand to help out, and we were constantly reminded to buzz should we need anything. My sole focus was Emma, and with no visitors to help out I had to just trust my instincts and care for my baby. All those 'firsts' are a bit daunting, the nappy, the changing, the feeding, the crying in the middle of the night, but we just got on with it and I never doubted what I was doing. Another plus was being served 3 meals a day in bed! So no need to cook or clean, wash dirty clothes or tidy the house, just feed, nappy, sleep and repeat. I tried to sleep as much as possible when she did, and on a quiet ward, without visitors, that was

quite easy!

We came home on the evening of 5th April and had a relatively stress free first night! The first week I really felt a sense of loss not being able to share her with my parents and my sisters. Every time we finished a video call I would have a wee cry. Again, because it was just us without any interruptions, we got into a routine fairly quickly. By the second week we were getting out each day for a walk in the sunshine and were able to pass by my parents' house and they could have a wee peek over their fence down into the pram, still 2m apart! Even though we were phoning daily, it was nice to see them in person and catch up (as well as drop off washing and collect dinners!). A few friends and family members who live locally would include us in their daily exercise route and drop gifts off and have a peek through the window to 'meet' Emma. By this point we couldn't imagine fitting visitors into our day ... where would we find the time? We usually weren't organised enough to be out for a walk before 4pm! Emma was also feeding every 2 hours and I don't know how that would have worked if we had had any interruptions. We had 3 midwife visits in the first week as Emma had jaundice and continued to lose some weight, so again we felt the aftercare was still there as much as you needed it. By the second week we were signed off and our health visitor came after an initial phone call. She arranged to revisit the following week to check Emma's jaundice and weight again. Unfortunately by the end of the second week I had developed mastitis and have had a high fever the last few days. Again our health visitor has been fantastic, and came to see us as soon as I phoned for advice. Services may be reduced and look different to the norm, but I can confidently say that my experience was that support was most definitely there when I needed it, lockdown or not.