AIMS For a better birth...

When fear becomes reality

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AIMS Journal, 2020, Vol 32, No 2



By Rosie West

My first birth ended up being quite traumatic. We had planned a home birth which I was very much looking forward to, but a prolonged hind water leak led to an unpleasant night alone on the antenatal ward, accepting an epidural after 36 hours, and a forceps delivery. It also caused my little girl to get an infection and she had 3 days on the neonatal ward, and we stayed in hospital for a week in total. When I got pregnant this time I was determined to have a calm, relaxed birth, away from the consultant unit. I planned a water birth in a stand alone midwife led unit and was looking forward to it.

I know that so many aspects of birth are unpredictable, and that birth plans often are out of our control, but after a consultant assessment I was classed as low risk, and there was no reason to think that a calm, natural, midwife-led birth was out of reach. I never imagined I would be giving birth in the middle of a global pandemic. One evening after talking with my husband about the pandemic situation, and listening to the news, I had a panic attack, completely out of character for me. I just couldn't believe the situation we were in, and I had no idea how to protect my baby, my little girl, or myself. I cried most of that night, and often over the next few days.

We decided that a home birth would be the best idea, as this meant that I could avoid the hospital (where presumably all the sick people were!) and could maintain some sense of control as we would stay in a

familiar and safe, or at least safe-feeling, environment. I immediately felt better. I could make a plan, which of course could change, but it was a start. It would solve any childcare issues as well.

Unfortunately when we went into lockdown our NHS trust suspended all home births, and shortly after that closed all the midwife-led units, so I was left with the consultant ward as my only option. I felt like things were spiralling out of my control all over again, and that I was ending up in the one place I didn't want to be. My birth partner would only be allowed into the delivery ward once I was in active labour, and would have to leave if I was transferred to the postnatal ward. The idea of another night alone on the antenatal ward filled me with panic, and if I did end up on the postnatal ward my little girl wouldn't be allowed to visit. She has never spent a night away from me, so not being able to see her if I did have to stay in again would be especially hard.

My midwives have reassured me that I will still get midwife-led care as I'm classed as low risk, and I can still have a water birth. If I arrive in active labour we'll go straight up to the delivery ward, and I should only have to stay on the antenatal ward if there is something wrong. If everything goes smoothly I could have an early discharge and not have to go onto the postnatal ward and can therefore stay with my husband throughout. But these all seem like big ifs! It also means trying to leave it late enough to get to the hospital already in established labour, which feels like a risk as well – maybe we won't make it to the hospital in time. The most traumatic thing about my last birth though was that night alone on the antenatal ward when my birth partners couldn't be with me until the delivery room, and I desperately want to avoid that again if I can.

I am focusing on hypnobirthing techniques in the run up to things which is helping. I think that the regular meditation, positive affirmations, and the feeling of doing something practical are all helping to make me feel both calmer and more empowered. I do feel positive, I just wish the situation was more static, so that I didn't feel I was heading into the unknown as much. I trust the midwives, and appreciate that the situation is hardly ideal for them either. The pandemic has taken choices away from us all.

The most unnerving thing is all the masks and gowns. I understand these are necessary, but they*are* still unnerving. I had to wear a mask myself at my antenatal appointments, which was very unsettling. The staff at the labour ward will also be in full PPE, which, again, I understand, but will make it very hard to forget the Covid-19 situation outside. This is where the hypnobirthing tools will come in I think, trying to stay in something of a bubble for myself will be important when everything around us looks so frightening.

Most difficult though has been childcare. I can't take my little girl to my appointments, so my husband has to look after her while he is trying to teach secondary school maths remotely from our spare room. My mum is unlikely to be able to come down (from Yorkshire to Shropshire) to look after her while I am in labour as well, so we have had to ask a friend who she is less familiar with, and if she can't come and visit should I have to stay in that will be traumatic in its own way. That makes it harder to relax and focus on the positives.

There *are* positives. We won't have to share cuddles once the baby is here, and I am getting quality family time which I might have missed if everyone was still at work! We will of course miss family though, and I have missed the company of other mums throughout pregnancy. Facebook groups are not the same, and only have a little over 3 weeks until I am due



Just before this Journal was published we had word from Rosie that her baby daughter had arrived! Rosie continues her story below:

As an update, our little girl was born on 14th May! About a week before my due date the trust restarted home births (although not home water births) and opened the alongside MLU. In the absence of a plan I booked into the MLU. We took my little girl for a walk on Thursday afternoon when I started feeling crampy, so at about 8:30pm I rang the midwife who advised me to go in. We had to wait for childcare to arrive and then do the 40 minute drive to the MLU, so it was shortly after 10pm when we arrived. The midwife took one look at me at the door and ushered my husband in as well as she was sure I was in active labour already- it turned out I was! I got into the pool at about 10:30pm, and at 11:05pm Eve Rosemary Ellis-West arrived. I had gas and air towards the end, but otherwise just stuck with the hypnobirthing breathing I had learned. Apart from the extra PPE, and my husband having to wait in the carpark when I was moved to the postnatal ward to wait for a doctor to sign off on our newborn check up, it was the birth

I had hoped for. So it worked out ok in the end! It's strange now, with the social distancing and different rules about healthcare services, but we're doing ok.