AIMS For a better birth...

Covid-19 and my IVF pregnancy

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By Gemma Wood

After having IVF we became pregnant on our fifth cycle. A long and emotional journey came to a happy ending. After an early complication I had all the usual anxieties that can come with being pregnant, not knowing the news that would break later into my pregnancy.

When Covid-19 was first found to be in the UK I was 25 weeks pregnant and understandably anxious. As the situation changed, the government placed pregnant women in the high-risk category. The uncertainty and the unknown nature of this virus were very daunting. My husband and I were both able to work at home from the outset, keeping to all social distancing and self-isolating guidance where possible. A new virus pandemic is worrying for the whole population and being pregnant increased my anxiety levels.

Our first maternity appointment since the Covid-19 outbreak was for our first health visitor appointment. Due to the lockdown this was a telephone consultation. We still found it helpful although not ideal. I still attended all my community midwife appointments but from this stage onwards I had to attend on my own. I found the most upsetting thing about this was the lack of communication prior to the midwife appointment as we were not notified of the protocol until we attended the surgery. This was the same for my 36-week growth scan. I had read on forums about the partner not being able to attend for scans but we had no communication from our hospital with the plans they had in place until we turned up

for the scan and my husband was asked to leave the hospital. Again, not knowing ahead of time caused me to be upset on the day, finding the process very stressful. I do understand the reasoning for all the changes and the importance of safety for myself, my unborn child, the other mothers and staff. With our IVF history we have had a lot of scans, medical interventions and consultations and my husband has been by my side throughout that whole journey. Then for him to miss our final scan after all we have been through together was very upsetting to me. I feel there are ways they could have made the situation easier. Although there is generally a 'no phone' policy in the scan rooms, if I could have filmed the scan due to the current situation this would have allowed my husband to have still had some involvement. Another option I feel they could have offered would be for me to have been able to have my husband on speaker phone so he could still be involved in the scan.

Lack of communication throughout this difficult time between the maternity unit and ourselves has made it harder for me emotionally. Understandably the situation can change fast but I do feel some contact from the unit regarding their updated protocol for appointments, scans and labour would help as we could discuss it as a couple and have been more prepared. I took the opportunity to ask what the current situation is for when I come in for labour but unfortunately the midwife was not able to give me a clear answer. The staff within the unit should be briefed regularly so they are able to fully inform the mothers on what to expect when attending hospital. I am a first-time mum and there is a certain level of apprehension around birth without the added concern of not knowing if my birthing partner can even attend with me.

I am currently 37 weeks pregnant and have been booked for an induction at 39 weeks. Following a telephone consultation with a consultant we have been advised that my husband will only be able to attend once I am in active labour, therefore I will be without my birthing partner from the start of induction with my husband only being allowed in once I am in active labour in the delivery suite. Following the birth, the baby and I will be taken to a postnatal ward where again my husband will not be allowed to be with us until we're ready to be discharged. The safety of mothers and new-borns is understandably paramount, but it still leaves me feeling upset and anxious that we cannot experience the entire labour, birth and post-birth period as a couple as we had planned.

Some couples' birthing plans are affected now by only being able to have one birthing partner and no visitors. This is not something that has affected us hugely as we planned for it to just be the two of us. This still leaves us in an unknown situation of when family and friends will be able to meet our new-born due to the current lockdown guidance and virus outbreak.

I usually work on the front line as a paramedic but due to my pregnancy I am not currently in that role. I understand the situation is new and changing rapidly, putting all the services under pressure. However, as I've already said, if the communication could have been better it would have allowed us to have been prepared for each appointment, and been aware ahead of time of the latest guidance during birth which would ease some of the anxiety.