



## The impact of Covid-19 on Tabitha's birth

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[AIMS Journal, 2020, Vol 32, No 2](#)



*By Hannah Kemlo*

In the weeks leading up to Tabitha's birth I was too busy to keep up to date with the news. We had a new kitchen fitted in January, my last doula client had a lovely homebirth at the end of January and then nursery started in February for my first daughter, Morven ... oh and Morven decided that now would be a good time to potty train too!

I had suffered from a little postnatal depression in the year following Morven's birth, triggered by work and childcare stress and exacerbated by miserable news stories, so I deliberately avoided the news when I felt it might be better for my mental health, and also because I knew I needed more of the happy hormone oxytocin for labour.

As my due date came and went, the Coronavirus came to the forefront of the UK news and was harder to avoid. My daughter, as all the best toddlers do, brought a cold home from nursery.

At 41+5 my lovely midwife Caroline did all the usual checks and we joked at the end that baby was 'self isolating' for as long as possible, or at least until 'Auntie Anne', the midwife who had attended my first birth, was on call at the weekend. Caroline was on call until 8pm Friday night and on Saturday she was due to fly to Lanzarote for a holiday.... I suspected the combined stresses of nursery starting and the pandemic were holding things up either way.

That afternoon, my Mum, who has been a doula for 20 years, had come to stay for the whole of March (I am so incredibly lucky to have a doula for a mother!) and she helped me to clean the whole house. We even disinfected the door handles.

On Friday morning I got up and took Morven to nursery at 9am. As we left the flat I felt my first contraction. I had a 7½ hour labour with Morven with no latent phase so I wasn't at all surprised that by the time we got to nursery the contractions were regular, 3 in 10. I went home to my TENS machine while Tom filled the pool and I soon had to ramp up the TENS machine. I checked my own cervix at midday and was gutted to find zero dilation – really no change from 3 weeks ago. At that point I realised I needed to stop thinking and surrender to the process so I stopped clockwatching and called maternity assessment anyway as, regardless of dilation, things were really quite intense now.

I was hanging off Tom's neck, swaying and singing 'Hickory Dickory Dock' when Caroline arrived. The things you do when you have a toddler! Secretly knowing my lack of dilation I delayed getting in the pool as long as possible but at 1:45 I gave in. It was lovely!

Mum was up in the park with Morven who was really keen to be present. We had prepped her with lots of 'Call the Midwife' and a children's book about homebirth. She knew that I would probably 'moo like a cow' and that there might be blood so at 2:15 when I started pushing and asked for the Entonox we asked Mum to bring her home. They arrived at 2:25 and just 2 minutes later 'a ball came out of Mummy's bum'! It was a little balloon of sac, moments later the head arrived, quickly followed by a hand, all still inside the sac. With one more push, out popped Tabitha 'en caul'. The sac burst as Caroline lifted her up to me and I saw for myself that we had another daughter!

We tandem fed on the sofa wrapped in towels and Morven was absolutely brilliant at sharing boobies. Our bubble of happiness lasted all weekend and into the following week.

By Friday Coronavirus had taken hold of the UK and flooded the media. Suddenly it WAS happening to us and the country couldn't pretend we were somehow immune any longer. On Friday they closed the pubs, but some areas, especially in London where half of my family live, people were ignoring the advice. This was getting real. My perfect homebirth postnatal bubble was popping. On Sunday we had our last midwife visit. NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde had just announced that the homebirth team was to be disbanded for 6 months; the midwives and women were heartbroken. Anne told us that 20% of all the midwives in Glasgow were already self isolating, not to mention the strain on the ambulance service. I could understand it, but that is no consolation to a pregnant woman facing the choice between birthing on a labour ward attached to a very large hospital with Covid-19 patients and no birth partner as he has to stay home with the kids, and no access to a birth pool, or a birth at home without a midwife, and potentially no ambulance should things go wrong. I was heartbroken for everybody and I thank my lucky stars or God or whoever that Tabitha arrived before I had to make that choice.

The Glasgow homebirth team are absolutely amazing. They are the gold standard for midwifery as far as I'm concerned. My three midwives are all very different characters but they complement each other

perfectly. They provide the best possible care and above all they make me feel SAFE. I hate being discharged! I am a perfectly capable mother with a wonderful loving and supportive family and friends but now I feel alone. No midwives are checking up on me and now with social distancing it's harder to access my support network. I never expected this to be easy but keeping the tears at bay now is a daily struggle. The health visitor came the other day. She weighed and measured Tabitha and then left to do the rest of the appointment over the phone. Makes sense. She asked me how I am feeling and I was honest. I'm scared, for myself, my girls and my family, especially my Mum who will be working in a London hospital, aged 69, when she leaves us. Oh and I'm financially screwed. My Health Visitor tells me that given all that's happening she'd be more worried if I said I was ok.