

When partners are banned from birth

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By Lucy Castelino

After four years of pregnancies ending in heartbreak, I couldn't wait for the day we got to meet our miracle rainbow twins. They were conceived naturally and came out of the blue during a very early scan! My maternity care throughout had been great. However, towards the end of my pregnancy, appointments started to change. New rules were put in place to protect women and other patients, and staff and hospital appointments were to be attended alone. I had to make some hard decisions about my care without my partner, Aaron, being able to be there in person to support me, and as we drew closer and closer to my babies' birth, the coronavirus got closer to us. Suddenly life became very uncertain.

I was under the mental health team of midwives. The impending birth of the twins, and the world they were being born into, was all-consuming. I was constantly promised and reassured by midwives and nurses alike that although they couldn't guarantee my partner would be allowed to stay for the duration of my time in hospital, like he would have done in normal circumstances, he would be there for the birth and at least four hours after. Such a short time would have been hard enough to digest normally but given our history and how long we had waited for this moment, it felt cruel. As the delivery day approached, I tracked the ever-changing rules, searching through social media and forums for other people's experiences: it appeared that what midwives had described as 'worst case scenario' was about to become my reality.

We arrived at hospital early on the 25th of March for a planned caesarean. Initially we were told Aaron could stay with me until after birth but, upon arrival, he was sent outside and told they would call him back to join me just before I was taken to surgery. Two hours later that became a very different story. I

was visited by the manager of the ward who couldn't stop apologising before quickly telling me that, following a 'big meeting' that morning, the rules had just changed and I should prepare myself as I was about to be going through birth and major surgery alone.

Prepare myself?! In what time and world can someone prepare themselves for that? I'd been handed Aaron's theatre scrubs, we were fit and well, no Covid-19 symptoms, we had even self isolated previously... we should have been safe! I felt numb. Then the bad news continued: Aaron wouldn't be allowed to be at hospital at all for the duration of my stay. I was so confused and felt completely isolated. My friend had given birth a few days previously in a nearby hospital and was still there with her newborn and partner. Why was I about to have that right unwillingly removed from me? I was about to become the first mother in my hospital to go through a caesarean without my partner because of Covid-19.

Suddenly, what should have been one of the happiest days of my life turned into one of the worst. I tearfully soldiered through the day having no other choice. I spent the day searching for comfort and guidance in strangers when it should have been Aaron, spending the minutes clock-watching, hoping the day would be over with and I would wake up from the nightmare which didn't seem to end. But it didn't end - I gave birth alone.

I then spent the next 5 days alone. Travelling slowly between the ward and SCBU, where one of my twins was being cared for, was the most painful experience, both mentally and physically, that I have ever had to live through. Those five days in hospital were a blur. Instead of enjoying my newborn twins and their precious first moments, I spent it alone, in pain and pushing myself to do more than I was capable of as there was nobody else to help, all whilst dealing with the added anxiety of protecting myself and my newborns from an invisible deadly virus. I willed myself and my boys out of hospital, counting down the seconds until I could be back home, safe and supported again.

Day five came around and I couldn't take any more. I completely broke down in the early hours of the morning and couldn't function enough to string a sentence together. A young midwife, recognising my desperation, finally sent me and my boys home.

Sheer desperation for the day to end got me through my twins' birth during Covid-19. I'm so angry that neither I, nor Aaron, will ever get that day back. I will never be able to correct it or make it a better experience. I feel completely cheated out of a day that should have been amazing. We were robbed of the experience of watching our boys enter the world together and when I look back it hurts and upsets me instead of bringing me joy. My whole birth experience was a surreal nightmare. I haven't stopped feeling guilty for how I felt during those five days, how I struggled to bond with my gorgeous newborns and how I wished the first five days of their tiny little lives away. I doubt these feelings will ever subside and whilst I recognise it certainly will be a tale to tell the boys when they are older, I wish, with all my heart, it wasn't a story any mother had to tell.