AIMS For a better birth...

Birth in a pandemic after a pregnancy loss

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By Clare Hardy

Whether it be your first or your last, most pregnancies come with some level of anxiety. Mine has been no exception. Following on from an early miscarriage a few years ago, we were thrilled in the summer of 2019 to find out I was pregnant again. After the previous heartache and loss, I found the early months very difficult, but as the pregnancy progressed, I allowed myself to relax a little more with each passing month.

My other daughter turned five in November 2019 and is in full-time education and, working part time, I made the most of the spare time to look after myself. The baby was due in March 2020, and although we didn't plan a five-year age gap between siblings, I liked the idea of being home on my own with the baby, and being able to nap and recharge while the baby slept and my other daughter was at school.

Fast forward to February 2020. I am in my last trimester, and looking forward to meeting our long-awaited baby but find myself sobbing uncontrollably at the prospect of the schools closing, possibly until the Autumn term, and home-schooling my daughter as well as looking after a newborn baby. My husband is still working, how on earth will I manage? I won't be able to rely on my parents to help because of social distancing. Not only that but very quickly pregnant women were added to the list of vulnerable people and were advised to self-isolate for 12 weeks. Thank goodness I'm at the end of my pregnancy. The

information and advice given out for pregnant women has been at times very vague and confusing.

Even though I know I shouldn't, I trawl the news every day and focus on any stories about pregnant women and the virus. Stories trickle into the media about pregnant women contracting the virus and passing it on to their babies, babies becoming ill with the virus and mothers giving birth alone which is a thought that absolutely terrifies me to the point where I struggle to sleep at night. This point of my pregnancy was supposed to be filled with excitement, joy and anticipation, not anxiety, confusion and alarm. I'm even starting to panic that all this worry and anxiety will harm my baby in some way and I become stuck in a vicious circle of negative emotion. I'm a person that needs certainty, and the problem with this virus is that nothing is certain. No one knows enough about it, how to cure or even treat it. I start questioning my birthing plan and whether it's too late to change it to a homebirth. Is it safe to give birth in hospital?

My due date was 29th March, right slap bang in the middle of the 'peak', where new cases and deaths are supposed to be at their highest. In my mind I think that it would be good to be a bit later and keep baby safely inside. Baby listens and I end up going into labour at 40 weeks and 10 days, in the early hours of the morning. My labours are extremely quick and I go from labour to birth in 2½ hours. One plus side of the lockdown is that the roads are completely empty so we were able to get to hospital without delay. I noticed very little difference in the birthing unit of the hospital, only that the staff are all just a sea of eyes peering at me due to the face masks they have to wear, but my husband was with me until I was moved to the postnatal ward.

After birth, my hope of being in hospital for only a short while is dashed as my baby needs monitoring due to her getting stressed during the birth and her heart rate dropping. I'm told 24 hours minimum which means an overnight stay which will be a lonely affair because, due to very restricted visiting hours, I will spend most of the time on my own.

My bed is in the corner of the ward, and my baby is placed in between mine and the next bed along with only a curtain to separate us. I overhear a midwife report that a lady had this morning shown a high temperature and had been put in isolation with three others. The hair on the back of my neck stands up and quickly I move my baby so that she's now between my bed and the wall. I feel so vulnerable and helpless to protect her in our current situation and I long to be home and safe. (It was reported later that all four women tested negative against Covid-19 much to their, mine and everyone else's relief.)

Despite my anxiety, my time on the maternity ward was long but uneventful. I'm in awe of the midwives just going about their daily routines with the normal vim and vigour I've come to expect over the years, the difference now being that they are working on the front line in the face of a global pandemic. Most will have children of their own, some are even pregnant themselves but still have to work. This humbles me and reminds me that whatever struggles I'm likely to face in the coming weeks or even months, my family are safe in the comforting secure bubble of home.