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# Lydia's Story: Something's Wrong

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*By Lydia Shiells*

This story is about my third pregnancy. I already had two girls who I had carried and delivered happily, the second one being a homebirth. I was well-informed about pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding (I had been a breastfeeding 'champion', no less, in children's centres).

From seven weeks in I felt something was wrong – with the baby, with me or with the pregnancy. I felt sick, tired and anxious. Worst of all, I felt very little connection with the developing baby. At my first scan I was told there was a high risk of Down's Syndrome, which heightened my anxiety and made me uncharacteristically nervous. I declined an amniocentesis because I didn't want unnecessary medical interference; instead I paid for the 'Harmony Test'[1] to tell me everything was fine. And I was having a boy.

I didn't like the idea of carrying a boy – I wanted to bond but wanting him out of my body was a stronger feeling. I started to have frightening, intrusive thoughts and severe anxiety; I lost weight and didn't feel safe near my children. Eventually I was diagnosed with serious mental ill-health and received CBT counselling through an NHS referral. The therapy helped and my psychotic episodes – as I now know them to be – subsided. Yet, I remained uninterested in my baby, detached from the experience. The therapy taught me that I needed to get out of my relationship (with the father of my second child and the one I was expecting). At the time I was heavily involved in a fundamentalist church and I had turned to them for support. Instead, they treated me like I was a sinner who needed to change. It was some time later that I found my way out of that church but my disillusionment with them started then.

I grew quite large in the pregnancy but was not yet diagnosed with polyhydramnios (an excessive amount of amniotic fluid). By 32 weeks I felt I couldn't cope – I couldn't walk because of pressure on my hips, I was huge, exhausted, having nightmares and carrying a baby that moved excessively. Somehow, I carried on to 36 weeks (although I didn't connect with the baby – I didn't wish him any harm) when I saw a consultant and asked to be induced. I was lucky to have the support of the Acacia team at Barnet hospital - midwives who specialise in mental health issues in pregnancy, working with me to lobby for an early birth.

The female consultant said something like: "I understand it's been difficult for you – once you are 40 weeks we will consider inducing you". I knew some people have to fight*against* being induced and couldn't understand why I was being ignored. I now believe my mental health problems were prejudicing people against taking me seriously or treating me considerately.

Outside of the room, imprisoned in a wheelchair and a pregnancy, I sobbed – desperate, close to giving up. A senior male consultant found me there and took it upon himself to do the good version of 'interfere'! The team were instructed to 'get this baby out' and, four days later, they did.

I was ready at 8.30a.m. but left to wait for a good while – I understood the need to wait and was patient, though in a lot of discomfort. Eventually they took me in and declared the baby was breech. He then turned. And turned again. What wasn't understood at the time is that the polyhydramnios meant the baby was practically swimming in a huge bag of water and every movement was painful for me – they just thought I wasn't coping. I knew from my previous experience of giving birth, that if the waters were broken, contractions would start, and the birth would progress quickly. They didn't believe me and insisted on administering a pessary. Suddenly strong contractions were every two minutes, the baby's heart rate was dropping, he was breech again, his hand was round the cord… and mum wasn't coping – again.

Eventually, I was rushed in for an emergency C-section which revealed the excess water. I felt relaxed after the epidural but my blood pressure dropped dramatically and I was blind for a few seconds.

My birth plan included *not* holding him – I just wanted him out. But as soon as I saw him, as soon as he looked just like my daughter, as soon as he was out and he was Humphrey, I wanted him. I held him, fed

him and loved him.

After the birth we were in hospital for five days; the baby had a slight infection and I was severely anaemic. Humphrey also lost a little more weight than ideal, though he was feeding regularly. I saw quickly that he was not latching on properly because of tongue-tie. I was threatened in a kindly manner with Social Services if I didn't agree to switch to formula, but I stood firm on that. An NHS Breastfeeding Advisor visited and strongly defended me, agreeing with my tongue-tie diagnosis. As it happened, when he was next weighed (by a lovely midwife) he had maintained his weight and they were no longer worried.

By the time we went home I was a different person; my experience of pregnancy, of birth, and of the attitude of the medics, was so different from what I had previously known. I took home not only a beloved new baby but gratitude for those who had treated me wonderfully – and hurt from those who had misunderstood, dismissed or disrespected me. The care you receive in pregnancy and birth shouldn't depend on luck.

Six weeks after giving birth I saw a perinatal specialist psychiatrist who explained my psychiatric symptoms and their origins in the brain. I felt so much better on acquiring this information. Looking back, I should have stood up to people and relied more on my family, my mum and sister especially – but I was very ill.

Humphrey is 6 now and has a possible autism spectrum disorder; he gets anxious, we avoid sensory overload, and he struggles with going between homes (I'm separated from his father and have since had another baby with my new partner). He is, however, a lovely boy, a karate kicking, popular, comic genius and I couldn't love him more.

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**Author Bio:** Lydia is a mother of 4, currently involved in care-work and running a houseplant business. She has ambitions to be a midwife one day when she has the time to do the training.

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[1] Prenatal test available privately in the UK: www.harmonytest.com/global/en/nipt-test-for-expecting-parents-cell-free-dna.html