



## My obstetrician was golfing when I gave birth.

Words: Ceri David

It sounds like the set-up for a joke, but the punchline was me having my baby in a way that bore zero resemblance to my birth plan.

The first warning bell rang when I said the words 'water birth' to the stand-in obstetrician, whose response was: "Why would you want to swirl around in dirty water?"

It had been about an hour since my waters had broken, in the Mazda, and my husband and I had popped into the hospital to check all was well. Four days from my due date, we were organised (bag packed, fresh batteries in TENS machine, cat sitter on amber alert) but nervous. Which I think is normal, getting this close to the moment when life is going to change forever. In that moment, I can't overstate how wrong-footing it was, having someone in authority be so dismissive.

I wish I could say we addressed our difference of opinion right then, and either found a way to work together nicely, or politely requested a different doctor. Instead, what actually happened was a messy blur of self-doubt, embarrassment, confusion and anger. But also: a beautiful, healthy, baby boy who's been raising hell now for four years, the little rascal.

### My Expectations

I fully anticipated childbirth being really, really hard. It's a barbaric throwback that ought to have evolved a lot more during that past few millennia, and I'm astounded so many women are up for that. But rather than go into labour with that mindset, I tried to educate myself. I read books. I wept through countless episodes of *One Born Every Minute*. I did a Calm Birth course, and a one-on-one class with renowned birthing expert Juju Sundin, until I reached the point where I felt I understood what my body was going to do during labour. It was like a weight had been lifted. Humans were designed to do this, after all! I was going to be OK! I would move and breathe and visualise my vagina as a peony gradually opening, until we finally got to meet the little human.

## **Birth Plan vs Birth Reality**

A water birth was our ideal scenario, so we selected an obstetrician and a hospital that were both open to that. Working against gravity is clearly insane, so I wanted an active birth, without too much time spent on my back. Beyond that, we were keen to avoid intervention as much as possible.

Of course, anyone who's written up a birth plan will also have been laughed at for it. Who do we think we are, imagining we can control something like this? I learned that the hard way. Here's the highlights reel:

Contractions have been going for about eight hours when we come back to the hospital the next morning, barely dilated. Obstetrician is keen to induce, but we want time to consider it. Cue massive eye roll, because, she explains, she's in a rush - the patient next door needs stitching up. Husband asks her to leave the room. I start vomiting. Three hours later, I'm exhausted and still not progressing, so we agree to induce. Active labour hits me like an earthquake. Electric shocks grip my body. Can't stand up. Can't talk. Just hang onto my husband and whisper, eyes closed. Try crouching, sitting, leaning, nothing works, especially while attached to a drip. Still vomiting. Two and a half hours pass like this, until eventually I find myself lying on my back, in bed, feet in f\*cking stirrups. The pain is too much so I ask for an epidural and they nod and smile, but what they actually mean is, it's too late, but we don't want to tell you that. Why on earth is the obstetrician wearing a white T-shirt? I feel a small human skull grinding through the bones of my pelvis, but his heart rate isn't bouncing back between pushes. I'm given an episiotomy and a vacuum is attached to the baby's head, before he is dragged out of my smashed-up peony.

They take him over to the scales to check him out, and eventually he cries. I say 'he', but they haven't bothered telling us. My husband has to ask. I have been abandoned, still in the stirrups. The room reeks like a butcher shop; that iron-heavy smell of blood and organs.

Then they hand him to me. And he's perfect. Enormous eyes, blinking, to prove he's real. And that moment he snuffle-nudges his way to find milk is like magic. Nothing will ever compare.

## **The Aftermath**

Perhaps things would have gone exactly the same way if my intended obstetrician had been there. And by the way, I know lots of women don't get to meet the person who will deliver their baby beforehand. But, still. I'd spent nine months building a trusting relationship with him, and then he wasn't there.

Also, my outcome was a healthy little hooligan, so shouldn't I just redirect my attention to that and stop whinging? Maybe. But telling me to focus on someone else is a great way to reinforce the idea that a mother is no longer an important individual entity, but merely a vessel, delivering up the next generation. Anyway, he's fine. Me? Less so.

I suffered two types of pelvic organ prolapse - a cystocele and a rectocele, which is what happens when your bladder and bottom collapse into the vagina. And I've spent four years blaming myself. Did I fail to prepare properly? Push in the wrong way? Not engage my muscles correctly in the weeks after labour? I felt ashamed. I'd never heard of this happening.

I've also spent four years been poked and prodded, trying different exercises and bits of equipment to help support things in there, jogging on the spot in front of a physio just to confirm that, yes, I still wet myself on impact. So far, nothing has helped. Some women opt for surgery, but that often doesn't work either, and we've all heard the horror stories about mesh.

It's only since going down a rabbit-hole of research that I discovered almost 50 per cent of women who've been pregnant will experience some form of prolapse. What's more, assisted delivery - using forceps or ventouse - increases those odds. Excuse me, but why do we not all know this information? The fact it's so commonplace but so ignored is the worst combination. It means we're expected to quietly accept it, instead of being angry. Well no thanks, because I'm angry.

### **Birth Satisfaction and Birth Trauma**

I came across two things recently which have made me reflect differently on that day. The Birth Satisfaction Scale-Revised is a questionnaire developed in 2014 by international medical professionals to assess the birth experience from the mothers' perspective. They're asked to rate 10 statements, including:

- I came through childbirth virtually unharmed
- The birthing room staff encouraged me to make decisions about how I wanted my birth to progress
- I felt out of control during my birth experience
- I was not distressed at all during labour

This wasn't used when I had my baby, but reading through it made me realise that the obstetrician who delivered my baby did not make me feel looked after. She was not sympathetic or communicative or patient. Her attitude made an already stressful situation even more so. Reading this was like being granted permission to feel let down by the experience.

The second thing I stumbled across was the term 'Birth Trauma', which was also new to me. I learned that while childbirth can be a very positive experience, one in three women identify their birth experience as traumatic, whether physical, through injuries occurring to the body, or psychological, as a result of a disconnect between the expectation of what would happen, and what actually happened.

When I realised I tick both boxes, it was like an emotional dam bursting. I cried, and cried, and cried. First on my own, and then with my husband. It's been four years since I was in labour, and I was not expecting to be quite so overwhelmed by it, this much later.

Writing it down hasn't been fun. It's been more like therapy. It's helped me. Maybe it'll help other women too.