

Our birth story

Baby Jessica McNiell – 14/04/2017

My husband Dave and I started our pregnancy a little naive about the journey that lay ahead. Sure, our pregnancy was planned and we were ready to raise a child, but we had given little thought to the actual birth. On the advice of my sister and a few friends, we had decided to give the public system a go. This was a big deal of course, as it strayed from the social “norm” that is birthing through the private system. Many of our friends couldn’t understand how it was even possible to have a baby without a privately-engaged obstetrician. In my stubborn way, this made me stand more firmly behind my decision – which of course changed everything.

I was fortunate enough to get a place in the Midwife Group Practice program at the Mercy in Heidelberg. Requesting this was the second piece of great advice my sister gave me. In all honesty, I didn’t know a lot about the MGP when I made the request. The prospect of going home within 12 hours of our birth scared the crap out of me, but I was assured that MGP was fantastic so I took the plunge.

At 14 weeks we met our amazing midwife Serena. We started ticking through the monthly appointments, but hadn’t really discussed the birth in detail at this early stage. In all honesty, the prospect terrified me and on a couple of occasions I was in tears wondering how I was ever going to get through it. I confided in a few friends and was told “Do a birthing class. At the very least it’ll help take some of the fear out of the whole process.” So, that is just what we did. Serena recommended Di’s class, so we signed up for the full Birth program in January.

Most of the information I had to date about labour was from my many girlfriends who are already mothers. Nearly all had some form of intervention, and I can’t think of one who refused pain medication. I was frequently advised to “just get the epidural and the rest is totally manageable” and told that “there’s no medal for a natural birth, why wouldn’t you take the drugs?” At this point, my attitude was pretty clear: “I’ve never had a baby before, I have no idea what it’s going to be like. I’ll just see how I go on the day and if I need the drugs, so be it.” Dave supported me in this and we both felt we had a good, strong position.

We went into the first of Di’s classes, feeling pretty confident.

We'd already done the hospital antenatal classes and felt we had a firm grip on the whole birth thing. By the end of that first class, I was left terrified, ashen-faced and glued to my chair. The video clips of birthing women were NOTHING like the very PG-rated, warm and fuzzy ones they'd shown in the hospital antenatal classes! I filled out the first feedback form on how I was feeling with a shaky hand and couldn't imagine how anyone could circle words like "empowered", "excited" or "confident" when thinking about their upcoming birth. I left the class wondering how the hell I was ever going to get through this ordeal.

The following week, Dave and I returned for the "all about pain" class with Rhea Dempsey. Still coming to terms with the first class, I for one was not looking forward to it. As Rhea started throwing her birthing stats up on the board I felt confronted and parked myself firmly in the "I trust the medical system to do the right thing by me" camp. However, as her statistical story unfolded, I found myself feeling a little surprised. Hospitals that are delivering 30% more babies than they have capacity for? How can the medical system I have so much trust in cope with that? And all those interventions and drugs might not be so harmless after all? By the time the whiteboard was full, my stubborn mindset had been well and truly challenged and was now in pieces. Bloody hell, what do I do now?

This was my turning point. My perception of a "good birth" had been completely broken down, but the concept of having a completely natural birth still wasn't particularly palatable to me. It felt like an immense mountain I would never be able to overcome. But then, as Rhea moved on to talk about the Crisis of Confidence, I finally found something I could relate to. I hadn't had a baby before, but I had done a lot of competitive cycling and I knew all about this point which we always referred to as "hitting the wall". It's the point where everything hurts, you can't breathe, there is nothing more to give and all you want to do is stop. You question why you're riding up a stupid mountain; why are you even riding a bike at all? I had been there so many times I knew it like the back of my hand. As Rhea discussed the Crisis further, I felt my confidence build. I knew if I could get through these points, I could get through my labour. Maybe, just maybe, I could even do it naturally without any drugs...

Over the following week, Dave and I discussed the class and I tentatively put forward the option of aiming for that illusive

“normal physiological birth”. We researched the effect of the different pain relief options on our baby and the labour and explored the cascade of interventions. Over that week our feelings towards our birth completely changed and when we next met with Serena, she was ready and welcomed all our questions. She reminded me how natural birth is, and that my body won't do anything to harm me. It will hurt, but it won't be more than I can handle. She was well and truly behind our birth plan and assured me she won't be giving me any drugs. She was confident I could do it and that we'd get through the birth just fine. So then, it was decided and although I still felt a little apprehensive, we were ready.

I entered the last month of what had been a typical and uncomplicated pregnancy. My scans were all fine and my tests came back with good results. My baby was growing nicely to schedule and her heartbeat and movements were strong. As I approached my due date, I focussed on not becoming one of those frustrated “just get it out of me” mums-to-be. I walked, I rested, I had preggy massages. But I couldn't help but feel a little nervous that I'd get to 42 weeks and need to be induced. I knew that with an induction I would lose that oxytocin-endorphin feedback and that the cascade of interventions was far more likely. If my birth didn't go to plan and I was to be induced, I wasn't sure I'd still be able get through it without any pain relief and the interventions that would more than likely follow.

And of course, things didn't go to plan.

On Good Friday, the day before my baby was due, I woke early to find I was bleeding. My initial elation that it was the mucous plug passing quickly diminished as I realised the amount of blood I was losing was something more. I spoke to the midwife on call and at her advice Dave and I promptly headed in to the Mercy's emergency department.

The emergency midwives got me settled in a small, bright room with foetal monitors strapped to my belly. We took some comfort in the fact that our little girl's heartbeat was strong and that she was still moving well. After a while, a young obstetrician came in to do an examination. He sat down and asked me a few routine questions about my pregnancy, what had happened that morning, how much blood I'd lost, etc. And then: “Well, we'll do a few tests and see if we can find the source of the bleeding. But really, you're 40 weeks tomorrow so we'll probably just induce and get

the baby out today.” There it was, the moment we’d been told about where our birth choices would be challenged and the line would blur between what’s medically required and what’s convenient.

I was stunned, but thankfully Dave was quick to jump in and questioned how he could make that assessment before he’d even done a preliminary examination. We explained our desire to avoid intervention unless necessary and that we did not want an induction unless we had a good medical reason. The OB sighed and muttered something about being in the MGP program and agreed to do the examination and blood tests before coming back to us with a plan.

Whilst we’d managed to stand up for ourselves at this initial hurdle, we were worried we had a few more to come. We anxiously waited another hour, the examination was done, blood tests were taken, and we waited some more. Then finally Serena came into the room. I breathed a huge sigh of relief. The person we’d planned with and who we trusted with the health of my baby and I was here. We knew we were in good hands.

She sat with us and we discussed the situation: It was unclear where the bleed had come from and whilst it had largely stopped, who knows if it might start again. My pregnancy could have continued without any further problems, but if more problems arose we could quickly slip from a point where the decision was ours to an emergency situation that was no longer in our control.

In essence, we had three options to choose from:

1. Be induced then and there as per the OB’s wishes;
2. Refuse induction, as was our right, but be kept in the hospital for observation until I either went into spontaneous labour or other complications arose;
3. Serena had convinced the emergency team to give us the option to go home and spend the afternoon getting ourselves organised and then return to the hospital that evening to begin the induction process with her and the MGP team.

We didn’t want to risk our little girl’s health or the chance of further complications down the track, so we agreed that option 3 would be best. Whilst I didn’t want to be induced, I felt this was the safest choice for our daughter and the best for me: Serena assured me the induction would be gentle and slow and I could still achieve a drug-free birth. I left the hospital feeling we had regained our power in the situation. I relaxed. Yes, I was going to

be induced, but at least it was on my terms.

As we headed back home I was feeling rather sore and crampy. Whilst I organised my things and had a shower, the cramps persisted. I had a wishful thought: Contractions? I thought I'd keep an eye on them – just in case – and started to track them around 2pm. They were short, about 30 seconds each, and not particularly painful. But they were sitting at a consistent 4-5 mins apart. I told myself it was probably just Braxton Hicks; proper contractions hurt and these weren't really bothering me at all. And then to my disappointment, the frequency of the contractions slowed to about 8-9 minutes around 4pm. They were a little stronger now and made me catch my breath, but from everything I'd learnt the contractions needed to be getting closer together, not further apart. And besides, it was nothing like what I'd been told labour would be like – I wasn't in enough pain for that. When Serena called late in the afternoon to see how I was going, I mentioned the contractions and that the bleeding had turned a little mucousy. It sounded like it could be show, and she said maybe there was a chance I could be in pre-labour, but let's wait and see when I get to the hospital. I arrived an hour later and we met Serena to have the balloon catheter inserted in preparation for induction the next day.

As Serena prepared to conduct a preliminary examination, I thought out loud of the possibility that I might be a centimetre or two dilated and wouldn't need to be induced in the morning. How great would that be?

Mid-way through the examination, Serena stopped and looked at me quizzically.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Hang on. Just let me check again...” She said. A pause. “I can't believe it. You're 8cm dilated. I think I'm going to cry!” My heart skipped a beat. 8cm? How could that be? Serena checked and checked again, and sure enough, I was well and truly in labour. With tears in our eyes, she said to me “Right then, let's go and have a baby!”

I was riding a natural high as we settled into the birth suite and prepared ourselves for a big night ahead. Eight centimetres and I hadn't had a crisis of confidence yet! I wasn't even in that much pain. I was astounded at the way my body was working and it gave me a confidence in myself that I could conquer the battle that lay ahead. As the contractions started to build, we put the

TENS machine on my back to help with the pain. Before long I had progressed from deep, focussed breathing to those long, primeval moans I never thought I'd hear myself make. At one point it occurred to me I was actually enjoying the labour; rising to the challenge of each contraction and meeting it head-on, then riding the endorphins until the next one came. I had slipped to a different level. I was aware that Dave and Serena were with me, but was away with my pain and the relieving waves of endorphins. Within a couple of hours my body told me I was ready to push. With each contraction, I could feel my baby descending and once my waters broke I knew she wasn't far away.

My memory of what happened next is a little blurry, but debriefing with Serena in the following days helped explain a lot of what occurred in the final stages of the birth. Shortly after the waters broke, my baby's heart rate started to become a concern. It would drop with each contraction as is normal, but rather than returning to her baseline to oxygenate it would shoot up to around 160 BPM and then crash down with the next contraction. As the peaks and troughs became increasingly bigger, it was clear that she needed to be delivered as soon as possible.

An obstetrician (thankfully a different one to the morning) entered the room and prepared for a ventouse delivery. From inside my endorphin bubble I was aware of what was going on, but not overly concerned. I had Dave on one side and Serena on the other and knew I was in good hands. The procedure was swift: an episiotomy, ventouse, two big pushes and my baby girl was in my arms.

Whilst we hadn't completely achieved our goal of intervention-free birth, I couldn't be happier with how it unfolded given the circumstances. Our baby had a very short umbilical cord and was likely stressed from the quick labour, leading to her concerning heartrate. Nonetheless she was born quickly and without too much force – the red ring on her head had disappeared the next day. More importantly, without any drugs in her or my system, she was born kicking and crying and we were both ready for her to feed. I was on an oxytocin high for days after the birth and feel so connected to my baby and so grateful to have her safely in my arms.

I had been so sure that I was going to have a mammoth 30-hour labour and that we would need to use every trick we had learnt to get through it. I was braced for crisis after crisis and was ready

for a huge psychological battle. But it wasn't like that at all. It was 6 hours long and in all honesty, totally manageable. Not only that, but somehow I have turned into one of those crazy women who actually enjoyed the experience! I feel I somehow won a labour-lottery and got lucky with my birth, but I also know it was largely a culmination of all the preparation we had done.

The journey I have come on over the past 9 months has been life-changing for me. I whole heartedly believe the decision I made to reject the OB-trend and request the MGP program was integral to the experience I've had. The guidance Serena gave Dave and I to educate ourselves, the knowledge we took from Di's classes and the trust Serena encouraged me to have in my body was instrumental to the birth I had and the mother I have become. I achieved something I never thought I'd be able to do and feel so accomplished as a mother and a woman.

Thank you.

Shauna (& Dave)