

Birth Story

When I became pregnant with my first baby, we were living in Paris. As there was a large public hospital with a good reputation just two blocks away from our apartment, I decided that I would give birth there. The hospital assigned me a midwife, who monitored me throughout the pregnancy.

I assumed that because midwives play such a large role in maternity care in France (obstetricians don't normally even assist at low-risk births in public hospitals), the hospital would be supportive of natural, non-interventionist birth. Boy, was I wrong. When I submitted a birth plan to my midwife, she saw what I had written – no pressure to have an epidural, ability to move around during labour, no being forced to lie on my back, no routine episiotomy, rooming-in, and said that I would have to talk to the head obstetrician. When I met with the head obstetrician, he gave me a list of things that might or would not be consistent with my birth plan, including a routine episiotomy because it was a first-time birth, electronic fetal monitoring and lying immobilized on my back during the second stage of labour.

Labour ended up being induced because the midwife suspected that the amniotic sac had broken (even though the test was negative). The induction resulted in incredibly painful contractions from the get-go, which I tried my best to deal with. Meanwhile the hospital staff kept saying to me, "Please take the epidural, madame, and *let us do our job of delivering your baby*".

It was at then that I had the revelation: If you want someone to deliver your baby, go to a hospital or clinic. If you want to experience giving birth, stay at home.

But the worst part of giving birth in the hospital was not the epidural that I was bullied into taking or the eight or so people with me in the room during labour or having to lie on my back all the time or the stirrups or the fact that it was essentially an event that was completely out of my control. (Fortunately, I managed to avoid the routine episiotomy). The worst part was having to stay in the hospital after the birth. I just wanted my own bed, my own blankets, my clothes, my bathroom and shower, my kitchen, my partner around at night and the familiarity of home. Being alone in a hospital with a crying baby night after night was depressing.

When I became pregnant with my son, I knew exactly what I wanted. I had already found Dr. Naumann, and told him early on that I planned on giving birth at home with a midwife. I was surprised when he told me that HE assisted at homebirths. I went home, discussed the options with my partner, Lionel, and we then sent our insurance company a quotation for a home birth assisted by a midwife and obstetrician. The insurance company (GMC) was surprised at how low the price estimate was before they realized that it was a quotation for a home birth. They had no issue at all with insuring it.

My biggest fear pertaining to home birth was that the pain would be as great as it was during the birth of my daughter when they induced labour using occitocin (pitocin). I tried to prepare the best I could by doing prenatal yoga in addition to the prenatal classes held by my midwife, Anna-Maria. I also read Ina May Gaskin's *Guide to Childbirth*, a book that I highly recommend.

At 37 weeks, I experienced some prodromal (false) labour, during which I had regular and uncomfortable contractions. However, the contractions were not strong enough to constitute real labour. I continued to drink red raspberry leaf tea twice a day and eat lots of fresh pineapple (helps to open the cervix), and I went into labour for real at 38 weeks, 6 days. I had been having regular but painless contractions that

morning while Lionel and I were walking around near the historical centre. (In fact, while we were looking at something in Euronics, I remember thinking that labour might well start soon).

Painful contractions kicked in at around 14h00 that afternoon. These contractions were very different from the way the induced labour with my first had started. They were painful but I could deal with them. Lionel called Dr. Naumann and Anna-Maria as soon as the contractions started. They took an hour to get to our house. In the mean time, I was able to manage my contractions outside on our terrace using a birthing ball (fantastic device – it is a simple exercise ball that you can buy at Decathlon). In between contractions, Lionel and I talked about how nice it was to be at home on our terrace instead of in some room in a clinic or hospital while this was happening!

When Dr. Naumann arrived, we moved the labour to the bedroom. I was still able to manage the contractions well, although they were getting more painful. I continued to labour on the birthing ball, then in the bathtub. Then the water in the bathtub got cold and there was no more hot water in the tank, so I went back to the birthing ball and then moved the bed, either on my side or on all fours. All fours soon became too painful (too much pressure on the abdomen) and I continued on my side.

At a certain point, the pain got to be extreme (I think that might have been transition). These were the same kind of contractions that I had from the beginning of labour with my first, but as I had already been experiencing a couple of hours of contractions, I was better able to deal with the extreme pain (I basically just screamed a whole lot in order to distract myself). I also knew that the end was in sight and that helped a lot.

It was 1600 and Anna-Maria said to me, “What time do you want to have this baby, Caroline?” I replied, “alle 5”. “Va bene. Nascera alle 5,” she said.

A few more extremely painful contractions (I think at one point, I was contemplating just going for a c-section using the kitchen knife). And then it was time to push. Dr. Naumann and Anna-Maria were quite keen for me to push while lying on my back (to avoid having to discuss this while pushing, **make sure you tell both doctor and midwife during your pregnancy that you do NOT want to push while lying FLAT on your back**). In the end, I pushed while on a birthing stool that Anna-Maria had made available.

It didn't take very long for the baby's head to crown (this hurt a LOT – like a ring of fire), at which point my water broke. Anna-Maria said that one of the shoulders was slightly stuck. Dr. Naumann picked me up from the stool (which must have been weird because I believe the baby's head had already crowned at that point), lay me on the bed and Anna-Maria inserted her hand, unblocked baby's shoulder and baby's entire body shot out. And then the pain was gone. Joshua was born at 17:10. He weighed 4.2 kg and measured 54 cm.

In my birth plan, I had asked for the cord to be cut only once it had stopped pulsating; however, the cord was extremely short (the baby was barely out of the birth canal and I could feel the tug) so Anna-Maria had Lionel cut the baby's cord right away. It took about two pushes for the placenta to come out. This I did lying on my back – I was too exhausted to do it any other way. Finally, I asked to be covered in many thick blankets, as my whole body was shaking from the shock of labour. Joshua took to the breast almost at once.

And just as I had imagined, the best part of having a home birth was being at home in my own bed with my baby after the birth. Lionel made me a sandwich. My daughter came home to find her little brother in bed with me. Anna-Maria and Lionel gave Joshua a warm bath at the foot of my bed, which the baby seemed to

enjoy. Anna-Maria and Dr. Naumann then cleaned up (what great service!) and left. It was night and day compared to my experience in the hospital.

The funny thing is that Lionel, who with our first child was insistent on a hospital birth, has since the birth of Joshua become the number one advocate of home birth. He says that for him, the experience was so much less stressful than being in a hospital, surrounded by medical personnel.

One other thing I should add: throughout the pregnancy, people asked, “but aren’t you afraid that *‘something will happen’*” (they never say what). I could have trotted out all the studies and statistics but in the end, my reply was that for me, personally, I had far more fears about the hospital than I did about giving birth at home. Most people seemed to reflect a lot more when they heard this response.

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