

Birthplace Matters

October 2016

A Campaign to restore the homebirth service for women and their families in the QE catchment area

Babies matter

Mothers matter

Fathers matter

Siblings matter

Midwives matter

Choice matters

Dignity matters

Rights matter

Introduction

Anniversaries are often reasons to celebrate and be joyful. Not so the 3rd anniversary of QE's homebirth service withdrawal. The promise of its return has been dangled like a carrot that is always just out of reach. In my role as a member at QE hospital in King's Lynn's MSLC (Maternity Services Liaison Committee) I have sat and listened as deadlines have come and gone again and again... even ombudsman recommendations and NICE guidelines have not spurred the QE into rectifying things.

The defence for this is always "but look at our lovely Midwife Led Unit". The MLU is a huge achievement and in many ways it is a beautiful suite. Compared with the ward, one might look at it and wonder why a woman would still prefer to give birth at home. I have heard the word "home-from-home" so many times I have lost count.

*But here's the thing: The MLU is not home-from-home. It is nothing like **my** home. It's probably nothing like most people's homes to be honest. And as such it still feels like an alien environment. And let's be very clear here. This is not about décor. It honestly runs much deeper than that.*

My home is not set slap bang in the middle of a hospital. My home is my space. I don't need to travel to it in labour, I can just focus on accommodating the intensity of my surges, and not on getting dressed and packed, going in a car, walking outside, dealing with a carpark, walking across said carpark and down bright, bewildering, noisy corridors, full of people who are sick.

In my home, I know only a few people will be there – including those dearest to me – my husband and children. Children are children, and need space to fidget and loll and play and do all the things children naturally do. The hospital may be fine for one sensible older child, but is not really appropriate for anything more than a couple of hours for a toddler or for several children.

I know the ways to comfort myself and relieve pain at home – curling up with my husband, running a bath for myself, choosing how to move – completely unhindered. I can pace the floors of my home without meeting many strangers, having to be buzzed in or out between rooms. I can pick at food in my fridge or chat on the phone without feeling self-conscious that others may be earwigging. I can make loud noises as I feel my surges getting stronger, without anyone staring at me.

As I give birth in my own space, I can be completely myself without feeling uptight, moving freely, which helps me to push my baby out more easily, reducing my need for intervention or "assistance". Afterwards I can sit and be naked and breastfeed and not have to keep covering myself up because someone is staring at my vagina or making conversation that is inappropriate to what feels to my family to be a sacred event.

I do feel there is a change in the air. Something is shifting. A genuine willingness to look forwards and see a brighter future for Norfolk and Cambridgeshire mums with homebirth on the agenda. New leadership at QE will invigorate and help to highlight who stands for progress and who is stuck in the past. Are we about to herald a new era where ALL women's birthing needs are met? Will it be a sustainable model in which we can rebuild, one homebirth at a time, the trust and skills and knowledge around homebirth both in midwives and mothers that are so needed? Will we learn lessons from the past as we move forwards? We can only hope!

Paula Cleary, October 2016

The following comments were compiled by me, Paula Cleary, at the beginning of October 2016 and presented to the board of governors at QE at their quarterly meeting. I attended with a group of concerned mothers, doulas and midwives and addressed the governors on their behalf. Copies of this document were left for all to read.

Jess Anslow

"We can't afford another independent midwife and will never have a hospital birth again so until they reopen the service we cannot have any more children. We'd desperately love to have more but will *never* repeat our hospital birth experience. Our independent midwife has left us in a lot of debt as we unexpectedly fell pregnant and didn't want to go through our previous birth experience again. Was the most wonderful amazing birth, at home in the middle of the night. We have no way of funding another birth without getting into even more debt so just can't risk it. It's heart-breaking. For us and many other women"

Kimberley Johnson

"I gave birth in QE hospital 4.5yrs ago and it was the worst experience of my life, I am shocked home births are still being "blocked""

Beth Booth

"I delayed having a second baby, waiting long enough (so I thought!) for the hospital to get its act together and employ enough midwives so that all women could birth safely.

I also delayed leaving my home to attend the QEH to have my second baby as with my first baby I was neglected both during labour and also whilst we stayed in for 5days afterwards.

I did not want to attend the hospital at all to birth my second after this experience with my first and certainly did not want to be there a second earlier than I needed to be but the delay caused my second daughter to be born much later than she should have been.

The night I gave birth to my first baby at QEH was very busy and I was THE ONLY woman not to be taken to theatre to give birth that night. Understaffed was an understatement. I narrowly avoided theatre myself by agreeing to an assisted delivery. If staff numbers had been at the correct level i would not have been forced to lay supine on the bed for hours whilst my baby was monitored by a machine.

This is not how babies should be entering this world. This is not how midwifery should ever be.

I was attended by some wonderful midwives but their skills are being totally over-ruled... 3 years of this is disgraceful. Get our midwifery back to normal".

Tracy Ripley

“Surely this Trust is in breach of Human Rights Article 8 and 5 ...”

Rachel Culy

“There is currently no choice for women in West Norfolk about where they give birth... hospital or go it alone! The Maternity led unit at the hospital is a step forward, but it is still a hospital at the end of the day. There are many well-known reasons as to why leaving the safety and comfort of your own home during labour can have an adverse effect on labour progressing, yet every woman in West Norfolk has to risk this in order to go to hospital as the choice of home birth has been taken away. It would not be acceptable to take the offer of a hospital birth away so why is it acceptable to take the home birth service away?”

Dominique Wall

“I can’t believe this has been going on for so long. For many women home birth is the safest option and the evidence supports that. My second was an unplanned home birth, before the service was cut. If I would have been forced to come into hospital she would have been born in freezing temperatures alongside the a10! Simply unacceptable and very dangerous. For any future babies I would not dream of going into hospital as despite it being unplanned it was the most amazing experience with a fantastic community midwife who had been doing home births for many years and had even looked after my mum at home!

Also from a professional level as a student midwife due to qualify next year, it *genuinely puts me off working at the QE as quite frankly it’s appalling that they are not giving women choice*. Most midwives want to be able to provide this service. I personally know that taking it away has not only been harmful to the women but to the staff who thrived on providing that service, some of whom have done so for many years. I was deeply saddened to meet my wonderful home birth midwife and find she was now working in the unit because she had lost the vital parts of a role she loved out in the community. Please QE listen to the women and listen to the midwives. We want it back!”

Charlotte Katherine Hawkins

“The hospitals are so far apart in Norfolk, and I had initially refused Kings Lynn due to appalling treatment there for another illness.

I opted for Norwich, however the amount of poking prodding and intervention, not to add my 'white coat syndrome' lead to me becoming very tense. This in sort put me in a very dangerous place, not to mention my husband being sent away several times then called back, at a 60 mile round trip each time it wasn't safe for him to drive he was so tired.

Bring back home births please or there will be a freebirthing mama over here next time!”

(Note: ‘Freebirthing’ is the term used for intentionally giving birth at home with no midwives)

Christine Marshall

"I am unable to attend today's meeting at the QE hospital but feel I need to share this with you all.

28 months ago I gave birth to my second child, a child I had wanted and planned to have at home. 6 years before I gave birth to my first child, in hospital and adhering to all of the hospital guidelines and protocols that governed that birth. The only good outcome from that birth experience was that both I and my child survived. I unknowingly suffered some fairly heavy birth trauma, which I had to face during my second pregnancy. I had always just assumed that my postnatal feelings were 'normal'.

Being told that I was unable to have the homebirth I so desperately felt I wanted and needed with this second child was devastating. I entered into a new state of increased anxiety that I would be forced to experience another terrifying ordeal filled with interventions and subsequent surgical birth. I had to organize private counselling because I was so frightened of a repeat birth experience that not only was I not enjoying my pregnancy of this much longed for sibling but I began to wish I wasn't pregnant at all.

In the end the only way I could find peace within myself and my pregnancy was to employ a private midwife to assist me with a home birth. I'd done my research and knew that statistically my best chance of VBAC was in water, something only a home birth with my own pool could guarantee as an option. Once I took control and the fighting for my birth rights ceased I felt like I could breathe again. I was incredibly fortunate to have a sensitive independent midwife and that we had the funds to cover private care. But should it be like this?

Should women have to go through their pregnancy frightened and fighting for what they need to feel safe?

I'm still dealing with the trauma of my first birth and I'm not sure I believe it will ever be much different but having taken control of my second birth and gifting myself the home birth that this trust was denying me has undoubtedly put me in better psychological, intellectual and ergo physical health entering into this new stage of parenthood.

Taking choice away, takes control away from the mother. The results of which can have devastating effects on health and is something a whole family experiences"

Dr. Sophie Messenger

"I know the NHS finances are in a terrible state, but when the Birthplace study shows us that homebirths are significantly cheaper than hospital births, (and also that homebirth is very nearly as safe for healthy first time mothers at home than in hospital, and safer for second time mothers), that homebirth are less likely to result in costly interventions, when the NICE guidelines were changed last year to reflect this, surely there should be a concerted effort to INCREASE the homebirth service and to actively promote it rather than scrapping it?"

Nicole Lord, mother and doula

"It's a travesty that in this day and age a woman is 'not allowed' to choose her place of birth. To force entire families to abandon their plans for a homebirth as part of a money saving exercise is purely mediEVIL! It's unfair.

Birth should be relaxed... if you feel safer at home you should be supported in that decision, it could and does, lead to fewer interventions and is less costly for the NHS."

Maddie McMahon, doula trainer, doula, author, breastfeeding counsellor

"How can the QE justify not providing this service when other Trusts manage it. If they are under unusual financial or staffing pressures, instead of punishing the women, why aren't they lobbying the government and speaking out publicly about the scandalous under funding of our maternity services?"

Samantha Gadsden

"It's an appalling situation when the evidence is clear and NICE Guidelines agree that home birth is as safe if not safer for low risk women."

Meg Huckstep

"The continued lack of home birth service is tantamount to abuse to women at an incredibly vulnerable time. This was never intended to be a temporary issue, as many women have been told- over two years later this problem rumbles on with no solution or reinstated date in sight. No amount of insight or offered solutions seems to make the slightest bit of difference and instead of respecting patients and opinion, it seems they are forced to fight at a time when physiologically that is the worst thing for both mother and baby.

Moving a door within a hospital ward at huge expense does not and never will amount to a solution. It misses the point entirely.

I know women in the area who have delayed having more children because the cost of an IM is sadly prohibitive for most however fantastic their attention, care and service, due to the terror and lack of choice for birthing in this area. How this hasn't been a major priority to the CCG, CSU and QEH to get together until a solution is found baffles me and is a huge let down to the women and babies that these providers are meant to serve."

Briony Elizabeth Jayne Polz

"I am entitled to give birth in a comfortable, quiet environment...

I have every right to feel empowered and to trust my own body with a midwife nearby if I need them.

My husband found me giving birth in hospital very traumatic and was astounded that he was sent on his way after 45 minutes of my son being born. He was so supportive to me, where was his support from our NHS hospital?!

Medical research has found that it is safer to give birth at home, why should I have that option denied to me and my baby!

As you can tell, this angers me greatly that I cannot put mine and my child's safety first because the hospital wants to do what's best for them."

Verity Croft

“This is a huge violation of women's basic human right to choose where she feels safest giving birth. That financially it makes sense for trusts to be putting more resources into this service rather than removing it and that the weight of responsibility they have to their service users should motivate them to get more politically active if funding is their issue. There is NO acceptable excuse to being unable to support s woman's right to birth at home”.

Ann Charles

“Why are the authorities deliberately contravening DoH and NICE guidelines as well as evidence which show that home birth is safer and cheaper for a significant number of women? Who is monitoring how the finances are being run and why hasn't this been flagged? Have they done a human rights impact assessment, and what contingency do they have in place for a claim made against the Trust on grounds of denial to right of access to a woman's choice of safe birthplace? What is the timeline for restoring this service? How many Independent Midwives have been engaged? How many Home Births have been requested? How many have taken place?”

Jayne Beatty

“There's enough on how we should live our own lives, please give us the choice on how we want to bring our own baby into this world!”

Emma Watling

“It's my right to have the birth I would like or at least the option available to me”

Sheherazade Whitehead-Sait

“Homebirth is a valuable and valid option for the majority of women and should be made available to them, the outcomes are better for mothers and babies in many cases. We have lost our homebirth team in Peterborough but community midwives will still attend homebirths. I would be devastated to be told HB was not even on the table after a satisfying HB with my first child. Give these women what they are entitled to and end the NHS lottery!”