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Deciding to have a home birth:

women's memories of help and hindrances 3-5 years on (Part 2)

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Summary

25 women who had had a homebirth between 3 and 5 years ago were interviewed about the processes involved in their choice of the place of birth. Although some women stated that they were determined from the beginning to have a homebirth, others provided clear and rich accounts of the factors which influenced their decision. These included wanting to be in their own home, simply not wanting to be in hospital, listening to (and often disregarding) other peoples' professional and lay views and beliefs about risk and safety.

Introduction

The Cumberlege Report, 'Changing Childbirth', stated that a woman's choice about the place of birth should be 'respected and every practical effort made to achieve the outcome that the woman believes is best for her baby and herself' (1993, p.25) which is reflected in recent publications emphasising choice aimed at both the professional and lay person (eg. Kitzinger, 1987, 1989; Moorhead, 1996). However, the great majority of women have their babies in hospital and therefore choosing to have a homebirth involves going against the norm. Further, because of unresolved issues surrounding the safety of homebirths the literature on this issue remains open to interpretation. Therefore, in parallel with other health related decisions (eg. Newell and Simon, 1972) deciding to have a baby at home is a complicated process.

This paper is the second in a series of three examining aspects of having a homebirth (Ogden, Shaw and Zander, 1996a; 1996b). The aim of the present component of the study was to examine the factors encountered by women when choosing to have a homebirth and to analyse the complexity of the decision making process.

Methodology

Details of the method can be found in the earlier paper (Ogden et al, 1996a). The section of the interview concerned with the processes involved in deciding to have a homebirth consisted of the following open ended question:

'Can you tell me about why you decided to have your baby at home and what led up to that decision?'. The women were also asked to reflect on their decision.

Results

When asked to reflect on their decision to have a homebirth all the women responded in a positive way. One woman said that she felt 'very, very good. One of the best things I have ever done. It was really the best decision I could have made, that's all I can say'. Another described her decision as 'One hundred percent ... the right thing' and one said 'I feel good. I think it was the best decision I made'. Most women could explain the processes involved in detail. One woman, however, said 'I actually don't remember sitting down and sort of making any kind of structured decision and weighing up anything, it just seemed to be the right and normal thing to do'. The women talked about their decision to have a home birth in terms of the following factors.

1/ Being at home.

The women stressed the importance of maintaining the routines of normal life, particularly those involving their other children.

'if they are there with you, you don't worry about them whereas if you are carted off to hospitalthey weren't that little but you don't have any worries about the separation'.

Several women felt it was important to bring the baby directly into the home with the other children:

'It is better for them as well really I think because they see the baby straight away, whereas if its in hospital they would have to wait'

2/ Not being in hospital.

Several women described their decision as a reaction to not wanting a hospital birth. For example one woman said 'I hated the idea of being in hospital. That was almost a negative decision'. Another described how she changed her decision to have a home birth at 36 weeks after going to hospital for ante natal care and:

'not seeing the same midwife and answering the same questions and nobody actually reading the notes and you go and one doctor would say 'come back in four or two weeks' and you would get back there and they would say 'why have you come back so soon'.

The women described their negative feelings about the general hospital atmosphere. One woman who had planned to have her baby in hospital said:

'I was about thirty three weeks when I went to the hospital. I looked around and said 'No, it is not for me'. We could hear people, all sort of impersonal. We could hear other people having babies. I think it is quite frightening because when you come in you are not at that stage and you hear people screaming their heads off - it puts you off'.

Another said:

'I wanted to be in a relaxed atmosphere, at home basically, do as I please because having been in hospital where probably, being in one room, hospital bed....not feeling very comfortable at all'.

Some women described their previous experiences of hospital births in terms of the medical

interventions.

'Because I had had such an awful time having Rebecca. I just felt it was very high tech and they jabbed me when I didn't want to and I don't even remember the birth I was so blotto'.

'My first antenatal appointment at was disastrous and it really scared me because I think of the 6 women who were there, not only did it take so long to be seen but 3 of them were sent home that night to come back in to have Caesareans so it did rather panic me'.

Women also described the way in which their treatment was carried out. In particular this related to feeling out of control in hospital, being treated like a child and feeling 'I was one of a number' and that 'it was so impersonal'.

'When I became pregnant with my second one, I thought I couldn't cope being somewhere where everybody was telling me that I was doing it wrong and I wasn't fitting in and I was causing trouble and I thought I want to have this next one at home'.

One woman described her previous hospital birth as 'quite managed and ridiculous' and said: 'things happen like they left you to it for ages and ages because they didn't have a bed, which was fine, and then as soon as they had space in the labour ward they dragged you up and told you that you would have to be monitored all the time and weren't allowed to move'.

3/ The role of others.

Some of the women described their decision as a very personal process involving no one else.

One woman said that she went to her GP and said 'Look, I want a homebirth'. Another said 'I was quite determined I wanted a homebirth. It is just what suited me, what suited my

lifestyle....It feels like an achievement that I have done.....its standing up for a choice'.

However, many women described the decision making process in the context of discussions with several other people. Sometimes they were described as being supportive and facilitative whilst others were described as obstructive.

Several women described the role of their GP and the midwives. For many, the involvement of these professionals was a positive experience.

'My doctor at the time had given me so much confidence and support with this, because she had said that the decision was entirely mine and if I wanted a homebirth it was fine ...She just gave me the confidence to go ahead with it'.

'I felt I was supported by the community midwives who knew that I was serious about what I wanted to do'

However, others described negative experiences of professionals.

'Well she said [the GP], basically their practice don't do them full stop for whatever reason..... well, one of the reasons we wouldn't want to have the responsibility for a baby's death or something like that'.

One woman, delivering her seventh baby at home said:

'The midwife wasn't too happy I don't think, and was very unhappy afterwards I think.....she was really worried that there might be a haemorrhage or something even though it had never

happened before in any of my other births'. She then explained 'She did agree in the end as long as there was a doctor present'.

The women described a range of positive and negative lay views about their decision offered by their partners, parents and friends.

Some partners were reported as being positive with one woman saying that her main reason for having a home birth was:

'to have John involved. He, my husband, is a very shy person and in hospital he didn't really feel he could take much part in what was going on and he was just an onlooker really. Whereas at home, he'd have felt more comfortable. All in all that is what we hoped for'.

Another said:

'In fact my husband was quite keen having had the experience of homebirth in the country, to have the first baby at home, but I was less confident.'

Several women had to convince their partners that the homebirth was a good idea.

'When my husband heard he was a little bit shocked. He is very worried about change but when he sees that it is good he is all for it. And of course once he realised that, well yes, there is a potential here to have a successful birth at home he was all for it'.

However, not all partners could be convinced:

'My husband was not over enthusiastic about me having a baby indoors. He is not one of

those fathers who will be there at the birth he was a bit panicked that he would be involved if it was a homebirth. That was his only fear, if I had a baby at home would I ask for help. I said no I did not need his help, I knew I could cope on my own'.

The women also described the views of their parents. Some mothers were positive:

'My own mother had two babies in hospital and two at home and for her there was absolutely no comparison. Home was the place to be, so she was very supportive'.

Other parents were not so positive.

'My mum was a bit worried because she only lives across the road. She didn't want to be in the house at the time, and she didn't want to be in here. She thought you should go to hospital and if anything goes wrong then you are there'.

'My Dad thought I was mad, especially in respect of the water birth. 'You obviously think you are a whale or something. Whales are the only mammals to give birth in water' but he didn't make me feel bad about it'.

Many women indicated that their friends had been supportive and encouraging:

'I had quite a few women friends who had had babies at home.....I think because when you have got one child you tend to get to know people who are having babies around the same time and there were certainly a few people who had had wonderful experiences of having

their babies at home....So you know you heard about their birth experiences and they were all very positive about it'.

One woman suggested that she started to select positive friends:

'I just mixed with people who could be positive and supportive and I didn't really want to spend that much time with people who were not very supportive'.

Other indicated that their friends were surprised by their wish for a homebirth.

'My friends weren't keen.....because they were thinking predominantly about my health and the health of the baby and they thought that in hospital if anything goes wrong I would be completely supported by modern technology'.

The women also described how they dealt with the more negative views:

'I think that in that situation I knew what I wanted for me, in the way that I wanted to do it and it is not for other people'.

Several women also described other sources of information they had used either to come to their own decision:

'Statistics have actually shown, I have read an article somewhere....that in fact that if you have a homebirth and it goes wrong you can get into emergency just as quickly as you can from the labour ward'.

or to convince others:

'the midwife kept giving me, telling me bits of information to tell him to have the baby at home, because they said there was less chance of the baby catching any sort of infections if it is born at home'.

4/ Risk and safety.

The women also described their decision to have a homebirth in terms of risk and safety and the implication for responsibility and blame.

Several women described their belief that the home was a safer place to have a baby.

'I think you can get more infections being born in hospital than you can at home'

'Birthwise I have always thought that it was a very safe option. You have a very skilled midwife, or probably two skilled midwives, possibly a student midwife as well at the birth, possibly a GP. For many births that take place in hospital, you don't have that skilled attendance. The house was easily accessible for emergency services and not very far from the hospital'.

Several women felt that hospital may be safer.

'Oh God am I making a risky choice....I don't know whether I would feel different if I lived in the middle of the countryside, you know, quite a long way from hospital.....but it is so close...I sort of felt that if anything was going to go wrong, I would be bailed out.....that was a security in my mind'.

The women also discussed the issue of responsibility. In particular, they indicated that although they wanted to feel in control they didn't want the feeling of responsibility if something went wrong.

'I didn't really want to go into hospital. I have heard a few scary stories which have put me off..... but having said that I didn't want to put my baby's life at risk. If anything happened with me not going into hospital, I know I would never have forgiven myself'.

Others believed that there would be sufficient support in case of an emergency:

'I knew some people who had haemorrhages and things and had been whipped in and it all ended quite safely in the end so I wasn't too alarmed about anything that went wrong'.

Discussion

The results suggest that some women are clear from the beginning of their pregnancy that they want a homebirth and are determined to stand by their choice whatever the obstacles. However, for the majority, the decision to have a home birth involved balancing up a range of sometimes conflicting factors which both helped and the hindered their decision.

The facilitative factors which the women considered included the benefits of being in their own home, the perceived negative aspects of being in a hospital, and the relative safety of their home environment. In particular, although hospitals were regarded as safer in the case of an emergency, the women believed that hospitals were associated with illness and disease and therefore in certain ways more dangerous than their own home. The women reported being exposed to a range of both professional and lay views which had supported their

decision and indicated that the views of their GP, midwives, partners, friends and families had helped them to decide on a homebirth and carry this decision through to fruition.

The women, however, also reported several obstacles which had hindered their homebirth. Some GPs and midwives were reported as being obstructive and partners, families and friends were sometimes seen as unenthusiastic, worried and concerned for the woman's health or anxious about their own potential involvement. The women indicated a variety of ways of dealing with these obstacles ranging from using information to change the minds of these people, deciding to persist with their intention in spite of their reduced support or choosing to avoid people with negative attitudes and mix only with those who were like minded. Even though faced with such obstacles, the women in the study ended up having a homebirth. But there may be many others, who considered the possibility of a homebirth, but ended up opting for a hospital birth when exposed to such opposition.

The 'Changing the Childbirth' document (1993) states that women's choices about the place of birth should be respected. In addition, more popular literature has echoed this view (eg. Moorhead, 1996). The results from this study indicate that these choices are complex. Perhaps, the emphasis should not only be on respecting women's choices once made, but also on providing a suitable forum for women to discuss their beliefs in a informative and non directive way whilst still engaged in the decision making process.

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