Birth of Lasya: Emphasizing the Need for Support in Home Births

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the support structures required for home births. Written by a first-time mother who is a physician, it details her journey toward having a home birth and how these support structures shaped her confidence in having a natural birth. She also elaborates on her preparations during pregnancy, her labor, and the insights she gained during this process.

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A first pregnancy is always scary. No matter how prepared you are and how much you have equipped yourself with the required knowledge—*each pregnancy is a unique story that has no precedence*. I was in a similar situation when I found out that I was pregnant. As a physician (general practitioner) from India, a homeopath, and a practitioner of alternative medicine, I was sure about one thing: I wanted to stay as far away from a hospital as possible. My obstetrics training during medical school did not help the cause either. I saw women wail away in agony as they were allowed to labor on their backs while they received their “routine” episiotomy cut and as they were asked to push against their natural instincts. Medical interventions such as use of cervical ripening gel to hasten the effacement, oxytocin drip, fundal pressure to hasten birth, and manual removal

of placenta were encouraged. I was starting to wonder, “Is this what nature intended?” Above all, what I found most repulsive was the lack of compassion for the mother among the staff. I have personally witnessed one of the nurses slapping the mother during labor because she was too exhausted to push. Needless to say, I was scarred enough for life to not want to naturally birth a child ever.

I count myself lucky to have lived in Ireland throughout my pregnancy where I stumbled upon a doula training course. Doulas are birth partners whose role during labor is to support the mother and to give reassurance during her moments of self-doubt. A doula is not a replacement for a midwife but she is familiar with the nuances of natural childbirth and hence offers invaluable support to the mother. Through that course, I met a lot of women who had planned home births and midwives who had performed home births. I soon realized that even though theoretically I knew the mechanism of birth due to my medical training, practically I had never seen a unmedicated natural birth in my life. I had to unlearn

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my medical training and relearn aspects of natural childbirth.

One thing in particular that stayed with me is the concept of a cascade of interventions where one small intervention in the beginning causes a chain reaction of events leading to forceps delivery, suction, or cesarean surgery (Petersen, Poetter, Michelsen, & Gross, 2013). For example, a Cochrane review concluded that walking and upright positions in the first stage of labor reduces the duration of labor, the risk of cesarean birth, and the need for epidural, and does not seem to be associated with increased intervention or negative effects on mothers' and babies' well-being (Lawrence, Lewis, Hofmeyr, & Styles, 2013). In hospitals, however, mothers are restricted to the bed and their mobility is curbed due to the intravenous line or the fetal monitoring machine. This could lead to inefficient progress of labor, slow progress, and increased pain, finally warranting the use of oxytocin and an epidural (Abisowo, Oyinyechi, & Olusegun, 2017). This starts a cascade of interventions leading to the mother requiring instrumental delivery or a cesarean surgery. I was slowly convinced that women have been giving birth in nature for eons and that our bodies are equipped to handle the stress of childbirth. Finally, during my sixth month, I made a decision to have a planned home birth. It was not easy, especially for a first-time mother, but I was willing to take that chance.

MY FIRST SUPPORT: MY HUSBAND

I had to first convince my husband about this decision and bring him on board. His initial apprehension was natural, but when he heard both sides of the story he was optimistic about this idea. He understood how hospitals these days have unnecessary interventions. On the contrary, home birth, if done under proper supervision, is as safe as hospital births (QUAG, 2018). We could be in the comfort of our home and welcome our baby in a place familiar to us. His support was crucial to give me the confidence to go ahead with this.

MY SECOND SUPPORT:

MY SISTER/BIRTH PARTNER

My sister, who flew in from India for my birth, was my birth partner because she was the one person I was most comfortable with. During the pregnancy, I kept her abreast with my research and readings so that she knew what was coming and how to

handle the dynamic situation. I educated her about the nuances of natural birth and how to assist me through various stages of labor.

MY THIRD SUPPORT: MIDWIFE

It is essential to have a competent midwife who knows exactly when to intervene during home births and who understands your requirements. It is pertinent that one meets the midwife multiple times during pregnancy so that one can familiarize with her workings. I felt an instant connection to my midwife as she addressed all the small queries and anxieties I had regarding the birth. Also, weekly checkups in the last month were done at home and I did not have to stress about going to the hospital. She was extremely competent at assessing the baby by palpating the uterus and using a handheld Doppler. Due to this, I did not have to take another ultrasound after the one at 20 weeks.

I made it amply clear to my midwife that I wanted an unmedicated birth and there would be no interventions unless it was medically required. Although I had my hospital bags packed, I never stressed about getting to the hospital. I was more calm and relaxed and thoroughly enjoyed the final days of my pregnancy.

MY FOURTH SUPPORT: SUPPORT GROUPS

One thing that immensely helped me was joining a support group. I attended the *La Leche League* as well as home birth and natural birth community groups. I listened to more positive and convincing stories and gained insights on what to expect. The Home Birth Association of Ireland also warned me that first-time moms have poor fetal outcomes and higher hospital transfer rates when it comes to home birth. The reality, however, was much more optimistic than I had hoped, and I was happy to see a few couples who had successful birth stories for their first pregnancy. The perks of the groups were twofold: first, they gave reassurance and boosted my

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morale especially when my anxiety kicked in and second, it was a great place to learn and share the knowledge one might need during home birth.

PREGNANCY PREPARATION

Even before I had planned my home birth, I prepared for the pregnancy as much as I could. Some books that really helped me through this process were *Birthing from Within* by Pam England, *A Thinking Woman's Guide to Pregnancy and Childbirth* by Henci Goer, *Ina May's Guide to Childbirth*, and *The Gentle Birth Method: The Month-by-Month Jeyarani Way Programme* by Gowri Motha. I especially recommend *A Thinking Woman's Guide to Pregnancy and Childbirth* for women who believe in evidence-based medicine. Goer makes a compelling argument (with all the literature) of how the medicalization of birthing process has made things worse in this modern age.

In addition to reading, I stayed moderately active, did yoga regularly, and maintained a healthy diet. This is probably a basic prerequisite that a lot of women ignore. At about 37 weeks, I also started doing perineal massages, which I read were helpful to stretch out the muscles of the perineum. A review in 2013 concluded that digital perineal massage during pregnancy reduces the likelihood of perineal trauma (mainly episiotomies) and the reporting of ongoing perineal pain postpartum (Beckmann & Stock, 2013). They advocate that women should be made aware of this technique and should be encouraged to do it.

THE BIRTH

The 23rd of April 2017, a week shy of my due date, started out as a normal day. My sister had already come over and my husband was home since it was a Sunday. We cooked, strolled, and watched a movie and I was enjoying bouncing on my pregnancy ball to ease off what I thought were Braxton Hicks contractions. As I retired to bed and snuggled with my husband, at around 11:30 p.m., I started having stronger contractions. The pressure was immense around my back and I felt like I had to pass a motion. My sister mentioned to me later that my voice became low

pitched like that of a cow and she knew I was in labor. My husband called the midwife and she was on her way immediately. In the meantime, I was already feeling lightheaded and was exhausted from the pain. I could neither sit nor stand and the only thing that relieved me was hanging from my husband's neck while he massaged my back. There was a moment when I felt overwhelmed and was second guessing my decision, but he reminded me repeatedly that I had been preparing for this moment for the past 9 months and that my body knew what to do. My sister constantly reminded me to sip water and also gave me some homeopathic remedies to relieve the lightheadedness and ease off the back pain. The midwife arrived at half past midnight and announced after a quick checkup that I was already 6 cm dilated. So it was finally happening!

I distinctly remember the midwife taking a backseat while I myself explored the positions I wanted to be in. She let me take control while constantly keeping an eye on the progress of the labor. She repeatedly checked for the fetal heart rate and made sure everything was going as it should be.

My sister, in the meantime, was helping me breathe through the contractions. My only aim at that point was to follow her breathing and this provided me with a welcome distraction from focusing on the pain. The pain was excruciating during the peaks of contractions, but I felt I also had the strength to bear it. I felt in control of the situation and that gave me the strength to carry on. I took the help of a birthing stool for a while till the baby crowned but after that my legs started cramping and I wanted a different position. That is when my midwife suggested going on all fours. This change in position definitely helped get the baby out faster and she was out by 2:40 a.m. She was immediately put on my chest skin-to-skin and the midwife waited for the cord to stop pulsating before she cut it. The placenta followed shortly without any interventions and the baby was allowed to latch on and rest for an hour before she was taken for measuring. I had a very short and intense labor but baby Lasya came out comfortably without leaving any tears in my vagina.

The whole birthing experience was surreal, and I felt a sense of accomplishment. There was a humble pride in knowing that I gave birth the way nature intended it to be and that my body knew what to do. The fact that I was allowed to follow my instincts during labor also gave me confidence to follow my instincts when it came to interpreting my baby's crying cues.

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I do not think this would have been possible without all the timely support I received. Every support pillar I had contributed immensely to the success of this birth and I shall be eternally grateful to them. I do understand that not all births go as planned and it is not pleasant when complications arise during home births. However, one thing that I learned through this process is that if we let nature take its course, at least the uncomplicated ones can labor without interventions. We do not need doctors scaring us at every step, but we need women who know the process and who trust nature enough to let it do its job. They say it takes a village to raise a child. I say it also takes a village to have one!

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DISCLOSURE

The author has no relevant financial interest or affiliations with any commercial interests related to the subjects discussed within this article.

SHRUTI SRIDHAR is a general practitioner from India who integrates homeopathy, acupuncture and diet in her daily practice. She currently runs a private clinic which follows a holistic approach to treating illnesses. She has published many papers in the field of public health and plans to keep in touch with medical research in the future as well. Her experience with home birth has pushed her to create more awareness about natural child birth in India where the system unfortunately is highly medicalized.