



Iain's first glimpse of his new world



BY CAMILLA RANKIN

The courage to choose

After much self-reflection Daleen chose an elective c-section over a VBAC

“**W**ITH MY FIRST baby, I went into labour when he was four days overdue. I wanted to try natural birth but was open to a c-section if it became necessary. It was about midnight, as my contractions became more regular and painful, so we headed to the hospital. I was coping well with the pain and felt confident, but I was also a little scared. It turns out that I was only 1cm dilated. Soon after we arrived, I used some labour massage oil and suddenly the contractions were coming hard and strong. By 3am I was struggling to breathe – I was really thrown and finding it really hard to cope. I asked for an epidural, but being the middle of the night in Sandton there was not an anaesthetist in sight! I was given a Pethidine injection instead which did bring huge relief, but it also really zoned me out. I could feel the contractions and some discomfort and no pain, but I felt like I was in another world – it was a horrible feeling. I could not move and just lay on my back as each surge took. When the injection wore off, labour became intense. There was no gradual increase to

get used to the pain – I was thrown right back into full blown, very painful labour. I was really scared. I remember sitting in the shower with the hot water on my lower back bringing immense relief and thinking that if somebody had just told me it was all ok and that I could give birth right there, things might have turned out differently. When the gynae finally arrived at about 7am, he told me my baby was not in the birth canal and that my labour would go on for a very, very long time. He also told me that the baby’s heart rate was slowing but it was not yet critical. He gave me a choice: to carry on labouring for who knows how long or to have a c-section immediately. I had not slept all night. I was exhausted. I just did not have the strength to continue and so we opted for a c-section. I remember the relief of the spinal but not much else about Matthew’s birth. He came out very blue and was diagnosed with congenital pneumonia, so I consoled myself that a c-section was absolutely the right decision. As soon as he was born, he was swaddled, shown briefly to me and then taken immediately to the neonatal unit (NICU). I fell asleep as they were stitching me up and only woke again late that afternoon. I was wheeled up to the NICU and given half an hour to hold

my new baby. And that was how it was for the next four days. Every three hours I expressed milk for him, was able to change and cuddle him for half an hour, but because of the tubes in his nose, I could not breastfeed him. I felt so alone and depressed. Once we were home I called the La Lèche League who gave me great over-the-phone advice. They suggested that I start “again” by placing Matthew skin-to-skin on my chest and let him find his way to my breast. It took a couple of days to get the hang of breastfeeding, but we managed. Matthew latched and we were able to bond, but I remember it being a very difficult time. I suffered from post-natal depression and I dwelt on the birth quite a lot. I felt that if I had been better prepared and had better support from a midwife or doula, who had my interests at heart, that the birth may have been



Lying skin-to-skin, seconds after his birth

very different. I really judged myself for not being stronger or labouring longer. I also felt cheated out of the “beautiful birthing experience” that I read so much about and that Alex, my husband, and I had really missed an opportunity to share a deeply intimate experience. But mostly I felt like I had been deprived of a deep and immediate bond with my new baby. I was very disappointed.

So when I fell pregnant with Iain, our second baby, I was desperate to have the “beautiful experience” I had conjured up in my mind and that was “sold” to me in antenatal classes. I was convinced that the only way to achieve this was to give birth naturally. I was adamant that I wanted to have a VBAC (vaginal birth after a caesarean) – I was going to do this “come hell or high water”. So I began my search for a midwife, I read the *Mama Bamba Way* and made it clear to my new gynae that I would be having a VBAC – which he was open to. As the due date drew closer I started to feel under so much pressure. Alex was 100 percent supportive of my choice, he said, as long as I was doing it for the right reasons. I began to doubt myself. Why was I so desperate to have a natural birth? What if I gave birth naturally and it was not the experience I craved? As I thought about it I realised two things. One: that there was a part of me that wanted this birth to prove to myself and other people, that I could do it. I wanted people to respect me more – I would have a story to tell. I felt I needed to birth naturally to give me a sense of closure, to complete my experience of motherhood, that by not giving birth naturally I had missed out on a life experience, a part of womanhood. And two: I realised that underlying all these thoughts and fears, my desire was actually very simple: I wanted to hold and breastfeed my baby immediately after birth. When I voiced this to my gynae, he told me that he could only guarantee this

in a controlled environment – that of an elective caesarean. I then realised that no one cared how I gave birth and that if I did it for someone else, then it was for the wrong reasons. So we booked a Caesar date. Almost immediately, I felt the weight of the world lift from my shoulders. I could finally enjoy my pregnancy, I felt so relaxed and at peace, finally.

The day of Iain’s birth came. We were able to explain it all to Matthew. We had a good night’s sleep the night before and we were all really relaxed and excited. The birth was amazing: Iain was lifted out, Alex cut the cord and Iain was placed skin-to-skin on my chest while I was being stitched up. I felt good and strong. Iain latched immediately in recovery. It was also the intimate bonding experience that I hoped for with Alex: we had just birthed our baby together. It was everything I had wanted: it **was** that beautiful experience.

I have a lot of respect for woman who birth naturally but I don’t believe a c-section is the easier way, or that you need less courage to birth this way. What I think is most important, is that women don’t feel under pressure to birth a certain way and that instead, you do what you as an individual feel most comfortable with. It is a very private and beautiful moment whether one opts for a vaginal or a caesarean birth and neither adds nor takes away from the experience of motherhood. The birth is over so quickly and then there are so many bigger, more important challenges to face, which require so much more courage, like saying no to a toddler when it would be so much easier to say yes, helping your child develop social skills, not to mention facing your own insecurities in the midst of a “please-let-the-earth-swallow-me!” public toddler-poo situation, and raising your child to be a beautiful, compassionate person with a sense of purpose in life. It is motherhood itself that takes courage. **YP**



Dad, Alex, meets his second child



Iain latched immediately in recovery



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