

Evelyn's story: all caesareans are different

“My boys have just charged out of the house with their dad to a Taekwon-Do class, school uniforms flung on the floor, computer games, books and painting projects abandoned in the rush to leave: just a normal day of after school chaos in an ordinary house.

“I head to the bookshelves where I have stashed the photo albums to search out the ones taken just after they were born—both by caesarean section: my eldest son is now nine and his brother six years old. I know in my mind's eye there is a photo of me smiling next to my youngest child, wrapped in a bundle before being whisked to special care after his birth.

“He was born at exactly thirty-eight weeks on the dot by an ‘elective’ caesarean, and it is a day that broke all the rules of what needed to happen for our loving bond and my mental health—if you believe everything you read about how only the perfect birth will ensure the perfect start to breastfeeding, nurturing and happiness.

“What utter nonsense. The reason I can't find the photo is that the last nine years have been a blur of child rearing, career change, post graduate study, renovations and life. In that time, I breastfed my sons for two and a half years and opted out of a fast paced life as a journalist on a major newspaper to stay at home with them. So much for not bonding!

“Want to know about my birth experience? Like that photo I can't find, it's seared into my mind, as every mother's birth experience is. And it is different to another woman's caesarean birth, just as every woman's vaginal birth is.

“That's what no-one tells you about a caesarean birth—they are all different.

“I remember visiting my co-author Caroline van de Pol after

the birth of her third son by caesarean section. She was up changing his nappy on the bed, dressed in leggings and a big t-shirt; she had the biggest smile on her face and moved around with ease. I guess this was only two days after the birth.

“Fast forward five years when I was very pregnant with my first child and visiting a friend in hospital after her long labour resulted in an emergency caesarean section after an undiagnosed breech. She also had what I call a ‘good caesarean’ the same way someone who gives birth in three hours and with no stitches has a ‘good’ vaginal delivery.

“But just because some women have easy vaginal births doesn’t mean that all women do. And just because some women sail through a caesarean doesn’t mean all women do.

“Alas, I was in shocking pain after both births. After my second caesarean it felt like I was being cut open with a chainsaw for ten days. I do not exaggerate.

“Because of my pre-existing hypertension, both my pregnancies were high-risk and my GP at least said he was sure I’d have a caesarean section because the risks of pre-eclampsia were so high. My obstetrician until the end wouldn’t commit himself, saying ‘we’ll see what happens’. So much for doctors using caesareans as a way of controlling their social calendars!

“As expected, towards the end of my pregnancy, despite lots of medication and constant monitoring, my blood pressure started to shoot up. Then at thirty-seven weeks and three days I got terrible stomach pains. I went into hospital for observation. My blood pressure remained high. Everything got worse overnight. With my medical history, pre-eclampsia was a spectre that the doctors feared and for good reason.

“‘Let’s induce the baby,’ said the locum. Of course, my obstetrician was on holiday. He broke my waters, it wasn’t pleasant as I recall, and as my blood pressure was still climbing, an epidural was organised to lower it. The epidural came about an hour and a half after my waters were broken and by that time

the pain had gone from mild cramping, to bad period pain. By the time the epidural was in, I was very relieved and drifted into a warm fuzziness. It was time to turn on the oxytocin and start those contractions. No worries, except there was a problem. A group of nurses crowded around me and looked at the machine, which monitors the baby's heart.

"With only one minute's worth of the oxytocin, my baby was already in distress. The drip was turned off, the locum was brought back, and I was prepared for an emergency caesarean.

"In the operating theatre, everyone was courteous and kind and excited, and never once did I feel like I was on an assembly line. I was in that warm and fuzzy place where anaesthetics take you and I was not stressed. I felt pulling, and then I looked up. The locum had our baby in his hand with one hand over the genitals—'guess what it is?' he said, and then the big reveal 'it's a boy!'

"My son cried, and I was immediately asked if I wanted to hold him. 'I'm going to pass out,' I said, and felt as if I was about to lose consciousness. I told my husband to stay with our son and then an oxygen mask was placed firmly over my face.

"I could hear my husband being asked if he wanted to cut the cord, someone took lots of photos with our camera. The locum joked about my doctor who was in Queensland, the paediatrician came over to me to pronounce my son 'small but healthy' and then the rest seemed a blur. Recovery room, the hospital room, my tiny 2.45 kg son next to me in a humidicrib for a few hours to warm up. Nurses helped me express colostrum and encouraged me to breastfeed.

"Well, it wasn't such a great way to have a baby, but does what I have described sound like a nightmare? I remember most of all the medical team making sure it felt like what it was—a birth—and not an operation. I've had operations and I know the difference. Don't be conned into thinking if you don't give birth vaginally you are not part of the event—because you are.

“Actually, I don’t remember the pain, just the hard work of my son’s first year and the saga of establishing breastfeeding and his screaming colic. But I breastfed him for fourteen months and never once gave him formula. I left my much loved job to stay at home with him, I felt so attached to him. All these things that I was supposedly barred from because of the nature of his birth.

“When I had my second son, I was booked for a caesarean at thirty-eight weeks. My medical team didn’t want to risk pre-eclampsia and thirty-eight weeks is considered full-term. I resented this being called an ‘elective’ caesarean. I chose a caesarean second time around because even though a some opt for VBAC (Vaginal Birth After Caesarean), it carries risks that I wasn’t prepared to take. Also, it wasn’t as if I was in a position to go into labour naturally—the baby had to come out at thirty-eight weeks for my health.

“Natural birth proponents say that women who are induced before their due date are quite likely to have cascading interventions that result inevitably in a caesarean section. So, if you are a woman who is having a high-risk pregnancy, and the baby has to be induced at a certain time for your survival, then the chances are you will have a caesarean.

“In my second pregnancy, my blood pressure didn’t rise dramatically—just predictably. I was to arrive at the hospital early in the morning and this time around, everything *did* feel like a production line. With my first birth, I held my husband’s hand while the epidural was put in. This time around, I was sitting on the operating table, my husband banished to another room, and I was told I could hold on to a weedy young male nurse for support!

“Because of the problems I had with the epidural during the last caesarean, I had a spinal block this time. I remember telling everyone that although I felt no pain during the operation, I was so lucid I could have been conducting a conference call while knowing someone was slicing open my middle. Give me drugged and fuzzy ANY day!

“But the doctors were lovely. My obstetrician was there this time, and the locum who birthed my first born was assisting him. “We should stop meeting like this,” he joked. They were relaxed and the caesarean began.

“I started shaking—apparently a side effect of the spinal—and I was wrapped in a silver blanket. I told my husband to just keep talking because the whole caesarean was really freaking me out this time around.

Then I heard the doctor say ‘It’s another boy!’ but I didn’t hear the baby cry. He was whisked away by the paediatrician. There were breathing problems—he wasn’t ready to be born. One minute, curled up inside me, the next, yanked out into the world.

“‘Is he all right? What’s wrong?’ This time no-one offered him for me to hold, but he was pushed briefly against my face as someone took a photo. ‘He’s fine, he just needs to go to special care,’ I was told.

“‘Follow him!’ I implored my husband, no longer worried about how I felt. I wanted our baby to have his dad with him—I could cope on my own.

“Was I a slab of meat on the table? I didn’t feel that way. A nurse took my husband’s place and held my hand, the doctor and locum told me my uterus was in good shape and I could have another pregnancy if I wanted. As I was stitched back together, they gossiped about a colleague who had a major midlife crisis, got a hair transplant and ran off with a stripper—I was happy to be distracted.

“The recovery was awful. This time, no baby next to me in the room—just a polaroid. Perversely, my second son was a normal birth weight—3.1 kg—enormous! We had to send all of the oooo romper suits home. The pain was relentless; I think I was delirious for about twenty-four hours. I was desperate to see my baby and finally I got put in a wheelchair and taken to see him.

“He was curled up on his stomach crying, and I said ‘it’s okay darling, mummy’s here,’ and he turned his head straight away

HANDLE WITH CARE

to my voice! I was an utter wreck, mad with pain and anxiety as a nurse had convinced me to stop taking painkillers! Luckily, an experienced female doctor on call that weekend took one look at me hunched and crying in pain in the wheelchair and said ‘first, we get the pain under control and then you can look after your baby!’

“And she was right, bless her. Once I got proper pain relief, the crazed fog and depression lifted and I got to breastfeed my son. It was a rough three days, but once he got the taste of mummy’s milk direct from the source, he never looked back—and in fact wouldn’t even take a bottle of expressed breast milk when it was later offered.



“It’s unrealistic to expect that everyone’s caesarean experience will be the same, just as no-one imagines that their vaginal birth will be the same as the next woman’s. But by pushing the caesarean birth into the realm of the ‘let’s just

EVELYN'S STORY

not talk about it' zone because it isn't 'natural' or 'ideal' we do women—especially women having a high-risk pregnancy—a great disservice.”

Evelyn Tsitas

