

Home Birth: A Safe Option

by Sheryl Wright

When you are pregnant there are three questions you are asked a lot – when is the baby due, what gender are you hoping for and where do you plan to give birth. There is not a lot you can do about the when and what but the answer to “where” is one area where parents today have a real choice.

Our culture still assumes that hospital is the best place for birth so because of this, and the many myths that surround homebirth, the majority of women don't consider home as an option. But each year in NZ around 7% of women choose to birth their babies at home – why?

Two of my three children were born at home and having experienced both, for me there could be no other way. My personal belief is that birth is a natural process, not a medical procedure, and with homebirth it also becomes a family event. The shift early this century from home birthing to hospital birthing occurred mainly for the convenience of medical staff, and while undoubtedly medical care has improved outcomes for high risk pregnancies, for healthy women with normal uncomplicated pregnancies who feel comfortable in the privacy of their own home homebirth is very real option.

My aim in writing this article is not to convince you to have a home birth. Birth is an experience which every woman has the right to experience in a way that suits her and her families needs best, and it is not the right choice for everyone. What I would instead like to do is provide some information so you can decide if it might also be the right choice for you.

Firstly let me say I don't fit the profile many people have of home birthers. This is the biggest myth that surrounds homebirth – that the only people “who do that” are candle burning, new age, hippy radicals! In fact the reality is that women of all ages, races, beliefs and economic brackets choose homebirth – and most are just average women like me! Some of the more common reasons for choosing a homebirth are:

- Midwifery led care
- More involvement for partner, other children and family
- Familiar surroundings and home comforts
- Privacy, freedom of movement and expression
- Less interventions
- Less disruption to regular family life
- No uncomfortable (or embarrassing!) travel to and from hospital
- Not having to comply with hospital protocols
- No separation from baby
- Drug free
- No risk of cross infection (remember hospitals are full of sick people!)

The biggest concern people seem to have about homebirth is that it is not safe and it's best to be at the hospital “just in case”. In fact the reverse is true and study after study has shown that for healthy women with uncomplicated pregnancies birth at home is as safe – if not safer! A study published in the British Medical Journal found that Home Birth is “safe in selected women, and with adequate infrastructure and support”. Another study published in the NZ Medical Journal (110(1040):87-9 1997 Mar 28) concluded that 'Home birth was a safe and increasingly popular, though minor, option for New Zealand women from 1973-93'. Even the World Health Organisation reports “it has never been scientifically proven that the hospital is a safer place than home for a woman who has had an uncomplicated pregnancy to have her baby”.

So with all these benefits and proof that it's as safe why do so many people choose the hospital? One issue is often the lack of pain-relief. People say they are “not brave enough”. While pharmaceutical options are limited at home there are some other very effective pain relief options such as water, birth pools, relaxation techniques, massage, heat packs, music, aromatherapy, hypnotherapy, homeopathy, herbal remedies etc to consider and in fact generally women find labour and birth less painful at home. In a study into the pain of birth researchers compared

couples planning both home and hospital births and asked them to rate the pain of childbirth, compared with other painful events. They found that "the hospital birth group rated childbirth pain significantly higher than the homebirth group". The UK based [National Birthday Trust Report](#) into home births in the UK also found that 95% of home birth mothers said they enjoyed the birth, compared to 76% of hospital birth mothers. In the same study, 62% of home birth mothers felt completely in control during labour, compared to 29% of hospital birth mothers; and a fortunate 14% of home birth mothers felt either no pain or very little pain, compared to 8% of hospital birth mothers. This may be due to the three factors which have been shown to hinder or obstruct the progression of labour in mammals: the feeling of being watched, labouring in an unfamiliar environment and being moved from one place to another. Sheila Kitzinger a UK midwife and author says, ""The right environment for birth is exactly the same as the environment in which to make love".

Another myth is that you can't have your first baby at home. The most likely "problem" with first births is things "taking too long". Fortunately, that isn't an emergency. It might mean that you end up transporting to the hospital, but it's not going to be life threatening.

Birth is never without risk, whatever the location, but generally birth is a gradual process and there is usually ample time to transport. even in the rare case of a true emergency. Midwives attending a homebirth carry a lot of equipment (often as much as small maternity units) and with experienced skilled one-on-one care potential problems are picked up long before they cause concern.

In closing I always like to point out that just because you plan to birth at home you can at any time change your mind and go to the hospital but the reverse is not true! Maybe it's an option worth considering when next you are asked "where".