



Birth, midwives and nurses

The experience of lesbians giving birth in hospitals and birthing units has improved in recent years and for many it has been entirely positive. Labour, birth and breastfeeding are particularly vulnerable times for any woman and inclusive, non-judgemental and knowledgeable staff can be critical to ensuring a lesbian mother's positive experience.

Male co-parents and gay dads through surrogacy can also be involved with the birth process and may interact with hospital staff. They may sometimes find themselves feeling excluded.

Hospital experiences vary widely – some parents have unexpectedly good experiences in small rural hospitals and less good in large inner urban hospitals. In any hospital stay, you will encounter a number of different staff and the response of those staff may vary significantly. Just because a hospital has policy or guidelines on working with lesbian

mothers, doesn't necessarily mean all individual staff will respond in the way you would like.

Some difficulties may arise with the hand-over of staff from one shift to the next and patients may find themselves having to explain their personal circumstance several times.

Some parents have experienced direct or indirect discrimination and homophobia during their labour and immediately afterwards. More often, they may encounter staff who are well-intentioned, but who are uninformed, ill-prepared or clumsy in their approach. On the other hand,

staff may be very respectful and extremely supportive.

While you can't control everyone's response to your family, there are things you can do to help foster a smooth hospital experience.

Having a detailed birth plan that includes reference to the non-biological mum – and donor or dad where appropriate – can be very helpful. Stating the nature of your relationship when you are admitted and asking that to be conveyed to each new shift at handover can also be helpful.

Some parents like to take a friend or family member who can advocate on behalf of the couple or single woman and manage these conversations.

It can be useful to ask about private or family rooms, and clarify whether partners can stay over, before you are admitted.

Make sure the hospital is aware that you expect the non-biological mum or co-parent(s) to be fully involved in all aspects of looking after your baby as soon as s/he is born.

Parents say ...

Hospitals

Staying over at the hospital, they were really good. I think we are fortunate – knowing other women who went through this five or ten years ago – things were more complicated then.

Michelle

I do remember a wonderful experience at the hospital when I went to have our second daughter. I fronted up to the receptionist and said, 'We're a same-sex couple and this is our second child', and the receptionist said 'We have a lot of same-sex couples now and you are very welcome here. We accept everyone'. It was just a lovely thing to say and it made a huge difference to us in feeling comfortable going through that service. **Mandy**

It was funny because they put us in a private room, which we were told we should have no expectations of. It seemed pretty clear to us that they put us in a private room because they didn't want to put us with other families. **Nicola**

I thought the hospital wasn't keen on the idea of Sally staying over. They never put us in a double room even though we were there for five nights and I had twins. Normally, people with twins would get offered a double room, although the babies weren't in with us – they were in the special care nursery – so that may have been a reason. **Ruth**

We had a family room and no dramas. We didn't experience any problems. **Jenny**

They didn't have stuff in place and we knew they wouldn't; that's why we had our own friends there to support us. That was at the local hospital about five years ago and it was pretty rough. **Katrina**

I remember getting the contraception lecture when I was leaving hospital. I was a bit out of it and I should have just let it go, but I said, 'I don't need to know', and the woman is saying, 'I have to tell you to use contraception', and I'm saying, 'It doesn't matter, I don't need contraception'. In the end, on my discharge notes, it said: *Patient is choosing not to use contraception.* **Pia**

In the actual labour and birthing, Jo was asked if she was my sister a number of times. We look nothing alike and it's pretty ridiculous to think we were sisters. It was like they could only place her if she was my sister. **Pia**

We had two friends come in, one to be the door bitch and deal with homophobia, and the other to support Rachel and me in labour. Because John is the dad, and he was there when Rachel was giving birth, we had a real concern that they were just going to trundle Amy off and give her to him. **Katrina**

Staff

To my knowledge, we were the first gay couple going through it in our region, but now there's a heap of us. A friend of mine who is also gay – her mother was our midwife and we felt very comfortable with her. We were in a very big hospital and there were lots of other midwives as well, but she happened to be there for the birth and it was all very good. **Jenny**

We went through a birthing unit at the hospital and had a fantastic experience. The midwives had pretty much seen it all anyway, so a lesbian couple wasn't too out of the block for them. **Bec**

The hospital was very mixed. There were at least ten nurses over the course of the time I was giving birth and they're just on shifts and it's the luck of the draw – some were fantastic and really progressive. I reckon you just always end up with at least one who's going to say some stuff that you don't want to hear at the time when you're giving birth. **Alison**

Because I have two older boys, and we had made plans and had support in place early, we were able to recognise it for what it was: a whole bunch of people who really didn't have any clue what was going on. **Katrina**

The theatre nurse we had was a gay man who lived in a big house in the hills. He lived at one end of the house with his partner and a lesbian couple lived at the other end, with a kids' room in between. **Ell**

I got some very middle-of-the-road, white-bread nurses who just couldn't fathom that I was doing this on my own and they either felt sorry for me, or felt sorry for my baby, or both – because I was single and a lesbian and there was no daddy. **Alison**

Non-bio mum

All the nurses were just overjoyed that a child was brought into this world who was going to be so loved; they treated me as a parent. **Ell**

Frances had a lot of medical issues early on so there were a lot of hospital visits. I also had quite bad postnatal depression. All the stuff in relation to her was handled really well and we were always both considered parents by everybody – doctors and nurses – without exception. **Trudy**

Just to complicate things, Rachel, I guess, would probably identify as trans, although that's not public knowledge. She had serious breast surgery when she was eighteen, but I guess that qualifies as a reduction. She was unable to feed Amy and I started breastfeeding in the hospital. It was a little challenging for them. I think it was a lot for them to take on board. **Katrina**

The midwives were a bit unsure as to how to include my partner. We have always parented very equally – right from birth. Even the labour and the birth itself was very much a joint thing, which I think they found a bit unusual. They did adjust and they respected our wishes in relation to all of that, but it was clear it wasn't what they were used to. **Nicola**

I remember one midwife in particular who came in and wanted to show me how to change a nappy and I'm like, *I couldn't give a f**k right now. I've just had a caesarean. I'm exhausted. Show the other mother.* And she just wouldn't do it. She was just holding our baby and she wouldn't give him to Jo. She might have been like that with a father, but I don't know. **Pia**

They saw me as the patient and they weren't really interested in Sally, even though she was doing half the work in the special care unit. But I don't think we had anyone questioning why she was there. **Ruth**



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