

“All natural birth in the family kitchen”

By Tim Martain

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LAYLA Beth Ann Gray's birth one week ago was no medical emergency, but she was certainly in a hurry when she decided it was time to come into the world. She was born just after midnight last Saturday in the family's Geeveston home with only her mother, father and older brother present and no medical intervention. Just the way mum Felicity Dowker and dad Stephen Gray wanted it.

“It's a bit sad that it's come to the point where a woman giving birth at home naturally is newsworthy, while a woman going to hospital and having all sorts of surgery is normal,” Ms Dowker said. “Birth is a normal, natural event and in most cases it's not a medical emergency, so why is it treated as one?”

Trained as a non-medical birth attendant, or “doula”, Ms Dowker said she was frustrated by the over-medicalisation of childbirth. While pregnant with her first child Aiden, now 2, she made the decision to avoid pain relief drugs and doctors unless absolutely necessary, giving birth at a birthing centre with midwives rather than in hospital.

For Layla's birth, Ms Dowker and Mr Gray decided not to even leave home unless there was a need for emergency intervention.

On the Friday night Ms Dowker's contractions were strong and during the night became stronger and closer together, so they called their midwife to come and attend in case medical help was needed. Mr Gray started filling the birth pool ready for the imminent birth, but never finished.

“I vomited a bit in the kitchen sink and had a few really serious contractions and then felt the distinct feeling of my baby being born and told Stephen the baby was coming NOW,” Ms Dowker said. “He put some pressure on my back while I stood over the kitchen sink and braced my legs against the cupboard. I roared and my body pushed and about five or 10 minutes later, Layla was born.”

Layla emerged into her father's waiting hands. “In the end the most difficult part was catching the baby,” he said. “The waters broke as she came out and she was very slippery and I was afraid to grab her too hard in case I hurt her, yet I didn't want to drop her.”

By the time the midwife arrived it was over and she simply performed the usual checks and weighings.

Mr Gray said he had supported his partner's decision to have a natural birth because it was her body. “I think men can have a say in birth choices, but women are the ones that actually go through pregnancy and have to deal with the issues of birth, so they should have the final say,” he said. He said his biggest fear was he would not be able to provide the emotional and physical support that Felicity would need in labour, so it was forefront in his mind to try to be

as supportive as possible.

“I find it hard to reconcile the beautiful experience that we shared to the TV perception of labour with the teams of medical staff running madly about,” he said. “Monty Python's Meaning of Life lampooned the medicalisation of birth back in the '70s and unfortunately we have not changed our thoughts since then.”

They kept Layla's placenta and plan to bury it in a pot with a tulip bulb, saying the organ that nourished the baby in the womb should be treated with respect, not thrown out like offal. Ms Dowker also swallowed small portions of frozen placenta in the days following the birth, saying its high iron and stabilising hormone content helps fight off fatigue and post-natal depression.

She said the home-birth community in Australia was growing and there were many reasons for avoiding medical intervention. “In some cases it requires medical intervention for the sake of both mother and child, and obviously that's fine, but in most cases it just isn't needed and causes more problems than it solves,” she said.

She said there were other ways to deal with the pain of childbirth without needing an epidural, and reducing stress was a big part. “Being in a safe, familiar environment lessens the impact of the pain and you don't tend to feel the need for medical pain relief at home.”

She said using a bath or birthing pool helped ease the pain and warm water was a particularly good pain reliever. “Getting into a warm bath relaxes your muscles, and a contraction is a muscle working hard, so if you can relax those muscles and just let it happen it takes away a lot of the pain,” she said. “At home you also have freedom to move around and get into different positions, you can move instinctively, vocalise and make as much noise as you need to.”

But she was careful to point out she was not opposing medical intervention when needed. “Obviously if you need medical help during your birth you need to access it, but I don't believe in accessing it before it's needed.”

“Women should be able to access the birth that they want, but I think if they were better supported and more aware of other options like home birth there might be less people making that choice to have medical intervention,” she said.

Vice-president of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (RANZCOG), Ted Weaver, agreed it was important for women to be able to have low-intervention births if they wanted them, but it was unwise to give birth without medical help readily available.

“There is definitely a cohort of women who are low-risk and will do well no matter where they give birth, but even with that group things can still go wrong very quickly,” he said. “We don't endorse home birth because if problems do occur there can be difficulties in getting the mother to a hospital.”

Dr Weaver said women had a lot more choice these days to be able to have the birth they wanted, but it was important to find the right balance between the mother's wishes and medical safety.

“The most important thing is to ensure safety for both the mother and baby and modern obstetrics has made it a rare event now for a mother or baby to die,” he said. “You can still have a birth with little or no intervention at a hospital and that way if something does go wrong there are no issues with being transported or having access to a doctor.”

Ms Dowker said choosing a home birth was also a conscious rejection of the system for her. “And every time I sit on the couch and breastfeed Layla, I'm looking right at the spot where she was born -- our kitchen. Normal, beautiful, powerful, healthy and simple.”