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Dear Pauline

I have breastfed four children, each with varying experiences. My last child, Jack was born in 2004 and was 7 weeks premature. My body was not prepared hormonally for breastfeeding, and was in shock due to my complicated, and traumatic caesarean. I had to hire a breast pump for 12 months which cost around \$60 per month, and I had to take medication (Maxalon and Motilium) to increase my supply. Massaging, literature, a supply line from the ABA, and support from my husband assisted me to continue.

Looking back I know that I put myself and my family through unnecessary stress. Continuing with breastfeeding was such a task, which I felt both compelled and pressured to pursue. Health professionals and other mothers advise that breastfeeding is best for babies. That fact cannot be denied, and it is common knowledge. But I do believe that there comes a point where continuing to breastfeed can be detrimental, psychologically and physically to Mother and Baby. I am sure that the pressure to keep trying to breastfeed when it clearly was not working, definitely contributed to my severe Postnatal Depression.

Do not get me wrong, I am a supporter of breastfeeding Mothers. I was one myself for nearly seven years (not consecutively). But I believe that there is unfair pressure on women to make a choice about how they feed their babies. I am hoping that this lessens the incidence of Postnatal Depression, and helps women to feel that they have more choices. I have attached an article which I wrote for My Child magazine which may help you to understand the situation that Jack and I were in.

I am now in a position where I can support women to feel okay about whichever choice they make. See below.

<http://mumknowsbreast.mumspace.net/meet-our-expert/>

www.sydneybubs.com.au

If you do need any more information, please contact me.

Many thanks,

Michelle Galilee

28/05/2007

My baby was not perfect. He had been born prematurely by planned caesarean after a long and difficult pregnancy. Everything looked okay on the outside. He was the most beautiful thing that I'd ever seen. But he was very yellow. He had a very red tummy. And his persistent screaming cry terrified me.

I feel guilty when I look at him. He should still be in my body for another 7 weeks. I have missed those little legs kicking around inside me. He looks okay, but he is sick.

Everyone around me said I should be thankful to have a live baby. After all, my body had failed to produce a healthy full term infant. My uterus could not sustain, or form an anatomically correct placenta to nourish my child, nor had it been put in the right place.

I have a nasty cut down the middle of my stomach. I don't want my husband to see it. I am bleeding everywhere. The nurse feels my tummy to make sure it's going down, and finds that my bladder has been paralysed by the trauma of the surgery. My heart hasn't coped with shock of all of the medications, and I am covered in tubes and wires.

They kept reminding me that if I'd had a baby 50 years ago, my Placenta Praevia would have killed me and my baby. So be thankful that you're alive and that your baby is alive, they said.

I had spent the past six weeks in a hospital bed waiting to either, die, bury my child or face the prospect of Postnatal Depression again. I'd experienced it when my last child had been born 4 years earlier. It took me two years to climb back up out of that pit. So I assured the people around me that I would not let it take me again. I was going to be the picture of maternal contentment this time.

We are in different parts of the hospital. I am in such pain. Waiting for someone to take me to the NICU in a wheelchair is torture. At one stage I wait 4 hours. So I decide to get up and walk. It's the longest, most draining walk of my life. But I am also excited, because every step takes me closer to my son. Imagining him in my arms makes every step worthwhile.

On Day 4 I am told that my baby has severe Jaundice. He will have to stay under lights, and have IV Fluids indefinitely. All I can do is express milk for him. But my body is in shock and it refuses to produce milk for my baby. The nurse sends in the big guns, a lactation consultant. I am on tablets that induce milk supply. I feel like a freak. Not only have I completely stuffed up my pregnancy and my child's birth, I have also deprived him of the one thing he needs. All of the books and literature said that my milk was designed and tailored for my baby. So why can't I do it?

Also on Day 4, we are told that our little boy has an infection around his umbilical cord. He is floppy, and tired, and not alert. And they say his head and neck aren't developed properly. I'm giving them logical reasons for all of this. He's sick. He's not developed because he's not supposed to be here yet. They're saying it doesn't look good.

I can pinpoint exactly when I spiraled into PND. I was walking back to my room and I overhear a telephone conversation. A man is telling someone about how easily his partner just popped the baby out! He is saying that she's gone for a walk with the baby to get a coffee, and that he is waiting for the visitors. The baby is huge and perfect. And his wife is beautiful and did so well. No they haven't moved to the maternity ward yet. It's only been an hour.

I just lose it. I must look pretty upset because a passer by asks me if I need anything. I just want my husband. But he has gone out for drinks with his mate. I want my other kids. But they are at home trying to maintain a normal life. I want my baby. But he's attached to a drip, under a light, withdrawing from morphine and probably starving.

Friends and relatives visit. But no one quite knows what to say. I hear my friend telling her mother that I don't look too good.

I go back to my room and cry until the next morning when my husband comes back. He spends the day with me. Holding my hand. Stroking my forehead. Urging me to sleep. But how can I sleep in this place, with this schedule. By the time I have lugged my sorry butt back to my room from the NICU, it's time to express again. I am exhausted. I am supposed to be doing the exercises that the physiotherapist gave me. Reading literature on breast feeding a premature baby. Seeing doctors. Sometimes 3 different doctors a day. All waiting for something to happen. An infection. A haemorrhage. A breakdown. They are all possibilities.

The nurses decide it's time to bring in more big guns. The psychiatrists.

The next few days were like a dream. I was totally in love with my son. So much so, that I hardly spent a moment in my room. The nurses are concerned that I am not resting enough. How can I go back to my room? My baby needs me. And I have everything I need in the NICU. My baby. A breast pump. A chair. But they want me to eat. I realise that I haven't really eaten since the operation. Since the birth. And I haven't had more than an hours sleep since Day 4. It is now Day 8.

I can hear the nurses in the nurses station. She hasn't eaten or slept in days. We need to watch her closely. I don't think she's going home any time soon.

The decision is made to bring my son into my room because they feel the walk to NICU is detrimental to my recovery. He has recovered well, and I have had 3 children before, so I know what I am doing. They tell me that they trust me to take care of my baby. They think I know what I'm doing.

My husband and I wheel our beautiful baby up to our room. Onlookers stop us in the corridor to ask how old he is. He is so tiny. Why is he so tiny? Oh you poor girl. I quickly learn not to divulge too much about our ordeal. I am so ecstatic. This will cure everything. Having him with me will change how I feel. I will feel like I have had a baby, and it will be the most magical time in our lives. Everything is going to be fine now. I have my baby with me. I just have to check his temperature and record it every hour.

But he's so little. Is he okay? And why is he breathing so fast? I don't think I can handle this. I need to get out of here. I ask the nurses constantly if he is alright. They are not sure if I am coping, so I'd better shut up if we are ever going to get out of here.

I keep my mouth firmly closed for a couple of days. I smile when the nurses come in to check us over. I even manage to feign a laugh here and there. As soon as the curtain is thrown closed I collapse onto the bed, pull the covers up over my head and cry, until it's time to look "normal" again.

I have to get home. I need to be with my other children. I hate hearing about their days. I should be there with them. Every single day they ask me when I am coming home. They want to

see me, but I am 40 minutes away. I tell them to be patient. When I get home we will have a big party and lots of cuddles. I start making lists of all of the things we will do when I get home.

It is then that I remember that I haven't bought anything for the baby yet. I hadn't dared buy a thing.

On Day 10 I am deemed healthy and sane enough to go home. As long the baby's temperature is taken regularly and he is kept warm. Panic washes over me and I feel like I am drowning. This is what I have wanted for weeks. And now it is here. I can leave. I am free to go. It's like eviction night in the Big Brother house, except I'm not wearing any makeup, and I'm leaving with rock hard, leaking boobs.

My husband arrives with our four year old daughter. He carries in the capsule, and we strap our little blue bundle in. The buckle takes up a third of his body. I have been packing all morning. My discharge papers are in my hand. And now it's time to leave. I can't believe it's all over. The pregnancy is over. The birth is over. Our first days are over. And none of it has felt even the least bit like "they" say it does.

Walking past the nurse's station, I wonder if they think I should stay longer. In the elevator my husband is grinning. His wife and baby are coming home. He finally has a son, and he's taking him home. He can hold him. Feed him. Look at him for hours and no one can tell him it's time to put him back down. He has never looked happier than he did in the elevator that day. Our daughter is singing to herself, a song she made up about being a big sister. The people in the elevator are making small talk about how little our baby is. I just want to go back into my hospital bed and pull up the covers. I want to hide. I do not want to go home. Not with a "small for dates", sick little baby. I

have had three children before. But this one feels like he's my first.

In the car park I have a huge panic attack. But I don't tell my husband. I already feel guilty that he missed his child's birth because my heart couldn't cope with anything but a general anaesthetic. I want him to remember this day for what it is. Not for having to calm me down. It's all been about me so far. I want my husband to enjoy being a father without having to pick me up off the ground.

In the car I feel like I am going to vomit. Everything is spinning. I've been either in a bed, or on a chair for weeks. The movement is freaking me out. I need to stop. Stop there at Babies Galore. We go in and I finally feel like I have had a baby. We buy a bassinette, and some preemie baby booties and beanies. The doctors have terrified me with stories of children dying from cold after being born prematurely, so I buy up big on items to keep him warm.

Every single thought I had in the first few days related to keeping my child alive. I was sure that he would simply stop breathing. I bought disinfectant and antibacterial hand washes. I urged all who came near my baby to wash their hands to their elbows. I just knew he'd catch some fatal illness.

My mission to protect him grew so fierce over the next few weeks, that I begged the hospital to take us back. I begged for help for my baby. My baby is dying, I just know it. Does he look alright to you? The psychiatrist says I should go home and get some things, and come back into hospital.

I arrive at around 11pm. The nurses drug me to the eyeballs as I haven't slept in around 5 days. I'm finally sleeping. My dreams are keeping from fully succumbing to sleep. I am holding my

dead baby in arms. He has starved to death because my milk is too low in fat. I wake again to find that I have only slept for 35 minutes.

I hear people talking about me. She's going crazy. We should take the baby away. I am sure my husband will meet someone better who can take care of the children when the baby and I have gone. I finally sleep. It is the most sleep I have had in the 5 weeks since our son arrived. This time I wake up feeling much more rational and plan "Get out of here" is put back into action. I smile again, try to act sane, and I am discharged 6 days later.

Over the next 7 months I continue to wash my hands until they are raw. What are those blisters? And why are my hands so itchy? The doctor says my obsessive washing has induced eczema. My little boy has it too. I feel so guilty. But I must keep him healthy and alive, and the only I can do that is to keep everything clean. I sterilize the knives and forks. Stock up on Milton and Bleach. I try to keep smiling. Somehow I enjoy my time with my baby. But I still think he would be better off without me.

I am convinced that I am not producing enough milk, and that my son is terminally malnourished. My doctor begrudgingly keeps writing prescriptions for milk inducing medications. I express my milk every three hours desperate to increase my supply. Breast feeding successfully became my ultimate goal.

I am trying so hard to get through everyday. My older three children have school, preschool and activities. But I just can't seem to stop these thoughts that something is wrong. How can we keep going like my little one? How can you smile when you look at me?

One Sunday night in December, 9 months after our son was born, my husband was holding our son. They look so happy. Why don't I feel that way? Then I remember something. I had not bought any Milton, Bleach or Antibacterial Hand Wash in weeks. I had been laughing, smiling and enjoying my life again. My baby was perfectly healthy and I was recovering from the trauma of his birth. I wasn't cured of Postnatal Depression but I was definitely on my way back out of the pit.

It has now been three years. Through my experience came a greater understanding of mental illness. I can now fully understand that when a person says they are depressed, it can mean so much more than just a tinge of sadness. I know that you can love someone beyond comprehension and be terrified of them at the same time. I have learned that my husband is capable of anything, and that our marriage could withstand whatever life throws at us now that we have beaten PND together. And I know that if I ever see another Mother struggling, that I can honestly and genuinely tell her that "I know".