

# Why are hospitals still using Covid rules to keep fathers out of maternity wards?

With partners still unable to stay after visiting hours in many NHS facilities, a mother shares the trauma of being alone after a c-section

By Florence Wilkinson

13 October 2022 • 6:16pm



Florence Wilkinson: 'I was alone with our newborn, yet during the course of that night I only saw a midwife once' | CREDIT: Rii Schroer

At 9.16am on a cloudy day in April I gave birth to a healthy baby boy by planned caesarean section. The team of NHS doctors and midwives worked like a well-oiled machine, performing what to them was a standard operation, while also showing me real kindness. After a short stint in a close observation bay, I was moved onto the postnatal ward, where my partner Ben quickly got to grips with changing nappies, helping me to feed our baby, passing me drinks and snacks and caring for the both of us. Still anaesthetised, I was completely reliant on Ben to help me recover from the birth and feed our son in his first hours of life.

Yet just a few hours later, the scene was very different. We had been warned by our midwife that due to Covid protocol, we were only allowed one visitor and that Ben would not be able to stay overnight. I had hoped that the rules might have changed by the time I gave birth, or at least have been relaxed when it came to women who were as helpless as I now was. (In the UK, one in four babies are now delivered by elective or emergency c-section. The operation leaves mothers numb for hours and then with pain to manage, particularly when getting in and out of bed.)


At 8pm, midwives bustled around briskly ejecting fathers and birth partners from the ward – and what followed was one of the hardest, most frightening nights of my life. I was alone with our newborn, yet

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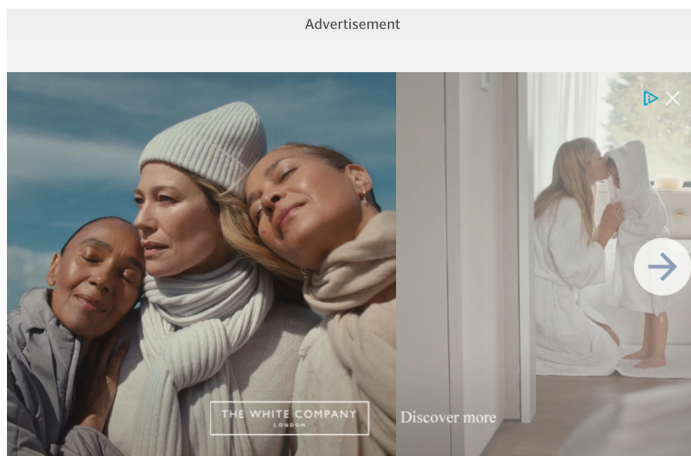
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during the course of that night I only saw a midwife once. I was still recovering from my operation and unable to pick up my baby. An exhausted healthcare assistant told me she didn't have time to help me and my newborn son didn't feed for seven hours. Despite ringing the buzzer for support, my painkillers always arrived late. [There simply weren't enough staff to look after us](#), but no partner to advocate for us either – and this was on what is meant to be one of the best maternity units in the country.



The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Baby Loss and Maternity has just released a report stating the impact of neonatal staff shortages as “bleak”. On the back of the report, the Royal College of Midwives (RCM) and the stillbirth and neonatal charity Sands have stated that there is a “severe shortage” of maternity staff, claiming that [500 midwives left the NHS last year](#) on top of a long-term shortage of more than 2,000. Gill Walton, chief executive of the RCM, has said that “crisis mode is now the norm” for maternity staff and that “urgent action and investment” is required. With this in mind, it could be argued that having partners or family on hand for brand new mothers is more vital now than ever.


My hospital finally changed its stance on visiting in July, but having conducted my own research since, I know that across the country women are continuing to suffer in this way. A review of the maternity policies listed on the websites of 90 hospital trusts in England reveals that 54 per cent still restrict partners from staying overnight after birth. While a few trusts have always limited access at night, many admit to bringing in restrictions during the pandemic which they continue to implement to this day. Examples include Hull University Teaching Hospitals Trust, University Hospitals Sussex and University Hospitals Dorset, where an open letter asking for the restrictions to be lifted has been signed by over 150 women and their partners.

“It is deeply concerning to hear that some Trusts are continuing to implement restrictions on visiting, such as limited postnatal visiting overnight, under the premise of Covid, particularly at this stage in the pandemic,” says Francesca Treadaway, director of engagement at the charity Birthrights. “There is overwhelming evidence, built up since March 2020, of the impact Covid restrictions in maternity had on women giving birth. It must be remembered that blanket policies are rarely lawful and any policies implemented should explicitly consider people’s individual circumstances.”

The hospitals with restrictions still in place are also at odds with national guidance. NHS England’s own “Living with Covid-19” plan states that all Trusts should “continue to enable women to have a support person of their choice at every point throughout their

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maternity journey and to facilitate unrestricted access for parents of babies on neonatal units”.

While different NHS trusts cite a variety of reasons for the continued restrictions - from preventing the spread of the virus, to reducing the risk of abuse towards hospital staff - low headcount seems to be the primary issue. Overnight visiting by birth partners, they state, requires additional staff at a time when these resources are under extra strain because of the pandemic.



'If we allow this to continue, my story – and the stories of all the women I've spoken to – will become the new normal too' | CREDIT: Rii Schroer

The dearth of experienced neonatal staff is having serious consequences. Early in September, London's St George's Hospital in Tooting – one of the three main maternity centres in south London – closed its maternity ward for 30 hours claiming it was too busy to take on more patients. On October 7, the hospital's Twitter feed apologised for the continued closure of its birth centre, citing staffing shortages. For many women in those hours just before and after childbirth, being turned away from your nearest hospital, being denied care, support and reassurance from both midwives and partners, can send anxiety levels spiralling.

I heard so many women crying that night. At one point I broke down myself and the woman next to me popped her head round the curtain. She told me she worked at the hospital herself, but was appalled by her experience as a patient. One woman I spoke to, who gave birth at a different hospital, said that despite Covid restrictions having been lifted across the country, her partner was forced to leave in the evening following a particularly traumatic birth in which she haemorrhaged and lost a lot of blood. “Having partners there is helpful as opposed to a hindrance,” she argues. “The staff are really overstretched. And to be expected to stay overnight with a one-day-old baby while in a lot of pain with very little help or support – it's really horrific and definitely compounded the trauma for me.”

Criticism of the approach taken by hospitals is shared by politicians too. Jeremy Hunt, chair of the Health Select Committee and former Secretary of State, commented: “Too often during the pandemic it seems that mothers' mental health has been pushed down the priority list in hospitals. It's unacceptable to ask partners to leave their new babies and often traumatised mums shortly after birth.”

He added: “That first night of parenthood is vital bonding time and a period when new mums need maximum physical and emotional support. I know from the birth of my own three children just how critical those first few hours can be and we urgently need to see maternity units show more flexibility in their approach to partners staying overnight”

staying overnight.

As for my own experience, the huge changes, challenges and unbridled joys of parenthood have taken over and I'm fortunate not to have experienced any long-term repercussions in my mental or physical health. But the same cannot be said for many new mothers.

The truth is maternity care is at breaking point. The pandemic has accelerated an existing staffing crisis. Midwives are leaving the profession due to burnout, poor working conditions, low pay, or the stress of being unable to deliver the level of care that they want to.

However, denying women access to their birth partners is depriving them of yet another layer of support. We've been told that the pandemic is over, and yet the restrictions that caused so much trauma to new parents are becoming the new normal. If we allow this to continue, my story – and the stories of all the women I've spoken to – will become the new normal too.



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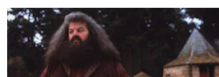


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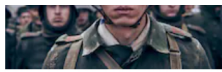
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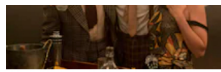




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