

Julie Sharon-Wagschal, "Individual versus Professional Preferences," *The Journal of Clinical Ethics* 24, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 287-8.

## *Personal Perspective*

# Individual versus Professional Preferences

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### ABSTRACT

The author, the mother of two children in Amsterdam, describes her birth experiences, the first in the hospital, the second at home.

My first birth took place in a hospital, my second at home, and I want to speak here—from the perspective of the woman in labor—about the importance of choice and the impact that birth place location has on the experience. Both of our births were good, positive experiences, but there was a clear difference between the two.

My husband, an American, found the concept of home birth illogical and certainly not as safe as a hospital one. We'd heard little of what having a baby at home entails—how it might affect labor, its benefits, its safety. Living in Amsterdam, we'd taken our cues from a cultural norm that giving birth at home is something that you just do not do, unless you have no choice. We'd never known anyone who'd had a home birth. Our choice for the hospital was an easy one.

My early hours of labor at home were wonderful, with my husband and doula helping me feel

safe and in control. This changed when we went to the hospital— from leaving the quiet of our house and stepping into the foreignness of the bright lights, sounds, and smells of a medical corridor, the cramped room that felt unclean by my home standards, the sense of feeling restricted. My preferences on how I wanted to lie and how and when I wanted to push were overridden, and two hours later my son was born.

I later understood that I was instructed to lie on my back because it was more useful for the midwife—that it was because I was in that hospital room that my preferences gave way to the midwife's preferences. Professional controls pre-empted personal desires for how to have my baby, just because we were in a hospital, a place where professionals are in charge.

My second labor started the same as the first, at home, with the important difference that we planned to stay there. We were better informed, by our hospital experience, and by reading more about what scientific evidence says about home birth. This pregnancy, I had slightly elevated sugar values that I was able to manage through diet. While I was assured by an internist that this would not be a problem, our midwife practice wanted us in the hospital for the birth, close to a baby monitor. I was 34 weeks along when I found another midwife whose hospital would support us in our choice.

This time, my sense of safety never wavered. My sense of control never wavered. I was not asked to lie on my back or push or refrain from pushing against my will. My daughter and I could do the dance of labor and birth in a relaxed, patient way, with our midwife there beside us. In the hours afterwards, there was no packing up, checking out, strapping in, and driving off. We were home.

Our choices for our first birth were not as informed as they could have been, and perhaps we were fearful of what we didn't know. Both births were "good," with healthy babies and no complications or interventions. But I'd guess there are a lot of women like me, here in the Netherlands and elsewhere, who go to the hospital without asking more, learning more, understanding more, about the impact that location may have on the profound experience of giving birth.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

These comments were first made in a presentation at the Future of Home Birth in the Netherlands Symposium in Maastricht, the Netherlands, 25 September 2012.