

Laura & Martin's story

Martin and I had always envisaged a life with a family, although getting there has been a difficult road of loss and unexplained infertility. Our story began when we, ironically, became pregnant six months after getting married. Happy to be in this position we had no idea what was to unfold. Sadly at my 20-week scan, doctors noticed that our daughter had some developmental abnormalities, including hydrocephalus and spina bifida. They suggested that she had a chromosomal abnormality. They were right. She had Patau Syndrome; a rare genetic disorder that meant that she had an extra copy of chromosome 13, meaning that she would not have lived past one year. Having terminated, I gave birth to Poppy Mai Savage on 30th April 2011.

After a short break, we decided to start trying again. At first we had no reason to believe that we couldn't conceive, but as time went on getting pregnant became difficult. Gradually this put more and more pressure on our relationship; the fact that we had begun to imagine and prepare for our lives as parents and it now wasn't working out that way made things incredibly hard. With an immense feeling of emptiness and grief to contend with, we began to argue frequently. We both felt low, but Martin found himself feeling depressed.

We were at odds as to what to do; while I would have sought any kind of assistance, Martin was far more reluctant to accept help. A combination of pride, fear of history repeating and our previous experiences meant that the idea of seeking help was a tough one for him. At the time I was experiencing some strange symptoms; my periods became a little irregular, they would be particularly heavy with clotting and I would sometimes bleed between my periods. Having retained some of the placenta following the birth of Poppy, I was concerned that this complication had caused further problems. I needed reassurance that my reproductive health was ok. We discussed this at length and decided that I would seek treatment for my issues, and any fertility treatment we would seek together when we were both ready.

The one thing that I wasn't expecting was the impersonal treatment that we were met with: processes had to be followed and while there was some concern regarding my symptoms, treatment was refused until Martin went for tests of his own. I felt held to ransom; a product on the production line. From here we faced a battle, one that we should never have had to fight to just get the right treatment.

Alongside this simple things irritated me: the fact that while waiting for my gynaecological appointments we were surrounded by pregnancy; I would wait to have bloods taken in the same place as the happy pregnant couples, even just booking appointments and communication was fraught with difficulties. The stress of infertility itself is enough to deal with without facing such a nightmare.

Tired of struggling, we took a break from hospitals and decided to just let nature be. So we got a dog and renovated a house. The distraction helped a little; it was nice for a time to have something else to be focusing on together.

During this time we come to realise how isolated we were. Our friends and colleagues were having no problems at all. Their photos and experiences on Facebook were a daily reminder of our failure. Why not us? Conversations at work and with friends would often be about children, particularly for me as I work within children's centres. We would try to involve ourselves as much as possible but

when you don't have that thing in common, the conversation only goes so far. Watching friendships flourish as they arrange to go to groups or parties together or perhaps something simpler such as offering some used clothing to one another, became increasingly difficult.

We would never begrudge anyone the joy a child brings, but not having that ourselves felt isolating, almost like we didn't belong. You smile every time a pregnancy is announced, genuinely happy for the couple, but inside you're hiding heartbreak.

Meaning well, people would offer advice. The cliches came out regularly like 'just relax' or 'it'll happen when you least expect it'. Some would ask if we were having enough sex? Or were we doing it right? We would laugh inside thinking, hmm five years down the line we could write a book on gynaecology, we know our hysteroscopies from our laparoscopies, we know the 'best' positions, the 'best' diet, what hormones do what. I think we can manage the sex part!

Our responses varied from smiling through it, to frustration, to laughter. Everyone means well, but when you've lived and breathed something for so long, there really isn't much more advice you can give. If you feel helpless as a family member, you're not. Just don't be afraid to ask. Those who listened were stars for us! We would have really struggled without bending the ears of our family and friends.

Treatment wise, we are now classed as 'unexplained' having tried for over five years. Martin has had his count and other sperm essentials checked and got top marks. That week he went from handing over his sample, as if it were an organ or limb, to being the biggest headed bloke in the building when he got his results. I have had several blood tests, scans, an internal ultrasound and a hysterosalpingogram (aka the dye test). My tubes are clear, I have no signs of abnormalities, no signs of endometriosis. Nothing, absolutely nada! I was offered Clomid and have had three cycles of that so far. The best way I can describe infertility is a cocktail of heartbreak at its purest, an unescapable grief, resilience, strength and even moments of hilarity in the complete exposure of your dignity. Fingers crossed things will come good and we will be able to jump off this fertility merry-go-round.