

Delivering babies made in China

Asa Butcher | 19.04.2011

When it comes to pregnancy, China can certainly deliver. Almost 40 babies are born every minute and this figure shows no sign of slowing, especially now the Chinese government has announced plans to relax its three-decade old One-Child policy. As in the West, babies are big business and prospective parents are offered a multitude of choices throughout the pregnancy. It can be overwhelming for first-time parents, so how do you navigate your way through the maternity maze?

To begin finding some answers, Radio86 interviewed Jeremy Carman and his wife Jacquelyn, an American couple responsible for the HavingaBabyinChina.com website. They have had three totally different pregnancy experiences in China and are armed with enough facts, suggestions and tips to put the most nervous mother-to-be at ease, although they do have a few scare stories to immediately unsettle them again.

There's no bladder...

With our first child, the hospital we originally chose was worried because the baby didn't have a bladder and that really scared us," recounts Jeremy, "We found another hospital and, of course, they found the bladder by ultrasound." The Carmans' first pregnancy experience, without medical insurance, had a slightly bumpy start but the state-run Beijing hospital they did choose met their high standards. "At that hospital I was allowed to be with my wife during the delivery; typically, hospitals don't allow that because women usually labour together and also the husband just gets in the way," laughs Jeremy.

For their second child, the Carmans took advantage of their insurance by using a more expensive Western-based hospital. "Even though all the doctors were Chinese, they had been Western trained, but I think having a baby is having a baby and China has lots of babies every year, so they are pretty good at it," observes Jeremy. However, Jeremy was bothered by the fact that C-sections are vigorously encouraged, with almost 70 per cent of babies born that way. "Even in America the C-section rate is getting higher just because it is convenient for the doctors; they are in charge of the birth, as opposed to letting the woman's body be in charge," adds Jacquelyn.

"Everywhere we went, they said to my wife, 'You're too small to have this baby, so we'll go ahead and schedule a C-section for you on this date,' without even wanting to try to have the birth naturally," recalls Jeremy. Jacquelyn believes that Chinese doctors are actually scaring women into having C-sections by saying that labour is very painful, while many hospitals refuse women pain medication unless they have a C-section.

Cultural barriers

When Radio86 spoke to the Carmans in Qingdao, they were just days away from having their third baby and again it was vastly different from previous experiences. "They have recently opened a private hospital just for babies here, just for birthing," reveals Jeremy, "All the doctors only speak Chinese and we don't have a translator, so we are doing everything ourselves this time, so that's been a very different experience for us."

When the Carmans had their first baby, the local hospital did have an international department, so the doctors had some knowledge of English, but the language barrier can be a massive problem for foreign parents-to-be in China. Jeremy advises having an advocate on your side, "Not only somebody that can speak Chinese for you, but also somebody to help you fight for the things that you need, such as at least trying for a natural birth or advocating pain medication."

Better safe than sorry

Throughout their experiences, they have found that Chinese doctors do opt for the "better safe than sorry" approach, which can seem overly cautious to those used to the Western approach. "I feel that because they only have one child they want to do everything possible to make sure that everything is going smoothly," observes Jacquelyn. "Every time I go to the doctors, I have an ultrasound and they do other tests that they might not do all the time in the West, like a Non-Stress Test, which they do every week for the last six weeks," she continues.

Jacquelyn told of one experience concerning a test that suggested the baby's heart rate was a little bit high and the doctors became nervous. "They are telling you this and then you're freaking out, 'Oh, something is wrong with my baby!', so I sent my test results to my cousin, who is an obstetrician in America, and she said, 'This is fine. It's all normal.' They can scare you with things that aren't necessarily that bad and that can be very stressful," she says.

Stress for pregnant women in China doesn't only come from the regular visits to the doctors. There are plenty of superstitions and traditions that women should observe if they want their baby to be healthy, which means avoiding scissors, drinking cold water and even criticising people.