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The Birth of ICAN: Elizabeth Handler's VBAC Birth Story

by Elizabeth Handler

On February 10, 1979 I gave birth by emergency cesarean to our daughter Lucie. In the recovery room I told my doctor and my husband that I would NEVER do that again. My husband just kissed me. My doctor told me that he only did repeat cesareans, so I would have to find another doctor.

Ten months later my La Leche League leader told me that there was going to be a weekend-long workshop on VBAC that I had to go to. It cost money we didn't really have, my husband had to take the weekend off of work, and I had to have a friend watch our still-nursing 10-month-old. We did it anyway. Nancy Wainer Cohen, author of "Silent Knife," was the presenter and it changed our lives. Before the workshop, my husband had been humoring me. After, he knew VBAC was our answer.

I found a family physician who had never attended a VBAC, but was willing to assist me in my birth, an OB who was willing to back him up, and a friend to act as my doula. Now to just get pregnant! A few months later I was, and my journey began.

When I was three months pregnant, my LLL leader called and told me there was someone I needed to meet. She had also had a cesarean and never wanted to do that again. It turned out that she lived just one street over from us. Three nights later Esther and Tom Zorn came

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Birth Culture in Brazil

**Stephanie Larson
Lends Perspective**

Interviewed by Stephanie Stanley

What are your credentials and experience in birth work and how did the birth culture in Brazil come to your attention?

The wonderful birth of my first child propelled me passionately into this field and I've never looked back. I've served expectant families as a Certified Birth Doula and a Childbirth Educator for 14 years, attending births at homes, hospitals and birth centers. I was named USA's National Birth Hero for my work founding Dancing For Birth™, which offers global classes to pregnant and new mothers and training to professionals. As I traveled the world championing normal physiological birth, I learned about Brazil's high cesarean rate and it concerns me greatly.

I've heard outrageously high claims of the cesarean rates in Brazil. What is causing the sky high cesarean rates in Brazil?

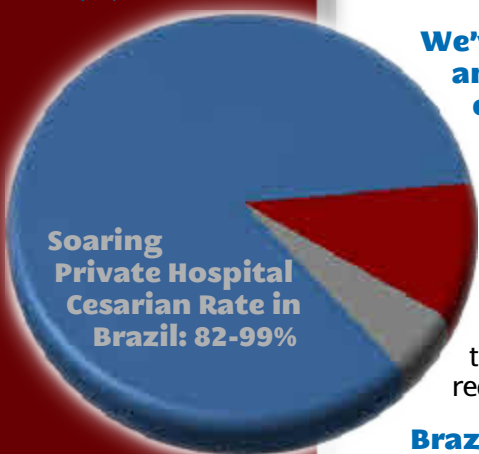
With cesareans reported at rates ranging from 82% to 99% in some private hospitals, vaginal birth has essentially become extinct in Brazil.^{1,2,3,4} People don't ask, "When is your baby due?" instead they say, "When is your cesarean?" What's happening is in essence the "perfect storm" — hospitals earn higher profits from performing cesareans, doctors prefer to attend births on a predictable schedule, young women have inherited fear that vaginal birth is harmful and too painful, cosmetic surgery is widespread so surgery is perceived as safe, and cesarean births have become a status symbol. I have heard firsthand accounts from Brazilian women who unintentionally birthed vaginally and then pleaded for the cesarean incision so they would have the scar (and the status) and their doctors complied.

We've seen a backlash in the US against a rising cesarean rate and the fact that one in three women now gives birth by cesarean. Are the women in Brazil concerned with an alarmingly high cesarean rate as well?

Brazil has a growing grassroots birth movement. Activists have protested in the nation's capital cities to support home birth and vaginal birth. They point out that women who want vaginal births are often pressured by their doctors into having cesareans instead. Sometimes scare tactics are used, such as the threat of episiotomy and misinformation that vaginal births are riskier. The cesarean rate in public hospitals is much lower than in private hospitals because the Brazilian government is pushing to reduce medical costs, and cesareans are more expensive than vaginal births.

Brazil is not the only country with a high cesarean rate. The OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) report, Health at a Glance 2013, shows that in 2011 Mexico had a 49% cesarean rate, Turkey's was 46.2% and Italy was at ▶

“Vaginal birth has essentially become extinct in Brazil”



37.7%⁵. Should we be concerned about a rise in cesarean rates worldwide?

The worldwide rise in cesarean rates cannot be ignored. The World Health Organization estimated that in a single year 6.20 million unnecessary cesareans were performed at a cost of 2.32 billion dollars.⁶ The corresponding unnecessary loss of life is staggering given that cesareans as much as triple infant and maternal mortality, compared to vaginal births.^{7, 8} We must also consider the implications to our species if bypassing the birth canal becomes the new norm. According to new studies, babies born by cesarean section lack beneficial bacteria that trigger immune responses. Because of this lack, they will be more prone to diseases due to underdeveloped immunity in their first two years of life.⁹

Some media outlets have called the drastic rise in cesarean rates an epidemic. Do you think this is a fair term to be used?

In 1970 the U.S. cesarean rate was only 5%.¹⁰ It has increased a whopping 660% in only 44 years. The drastic rise in cesarean rates is undoubtedly an epidemic. It's happening in many wealthy countries in addition to the U.S. Normal physiological birth is routinely being replaced by surgical birth, without necessity. In the U.S., cesarean is the most common surgery.¹¹ This epidemic must be controlled, and cesareans brought back down to viable rates. Our maternal mortality rate is higher than in 47 other countries and our infant mortality rate is higher than in 50 other countries.¹² Hypermedicalized birth has become the norm, but consider the fact that the first placental mammal gave birth over 100 million years ago; vaginal birth is tried and true. It is vital to our species. Medical intervention is beneficial in rare cases, but its overuse doesn't help, it hurts.

What can women do to support each other and change the culture of birth, and specifically the fear surrounding birth, for future generations?

Women have the power to create positive, lasting change. We have a strong voice. And this is not only a women's issue, it is a vital issue for the entire human race. We need to join together across continents and across disciplines to reinstate normal physiological birth to its rightful place at the pinnacle of optimal, safe birth. We need to adopt the midwifery model of care, which has been proven to lower cesarean rates, without compromising safety,^{13,14,15} as the primary model of care, and reserve the medical model for the rare instances when intervention is truly required. We need to support and protect women's autonomy to choose where they birth, how they birth, and with whom they birth. We need to ensure that care providers are exceptionally skilled at not disturbing the birthing woman, so as to not interfere with her primal birth instincts.

We need to let our voices be heard. When I gave birth to my first child, supported by a midwife, it was such an empowering and wonderful experience that I talked about it nonstop. But people thought I was crazy for dancing during my labor and giving birth standing up, without drugs, so I clammed up. Now I once again tell my euphoric birth stories to pregnant women so they know that birth has the potential to be the best experience of their lives. We need to share our empowered birth stories so women can be excited about birth instead of fearing it. Nuclear family structure can leave many expectant and new mothers feeling isolated and afraid. Gathering together to support one another during pregnancy, birth and mothering is absolutely essential.

To the wonderful women of Brazil: take heart, with those incredible samba dance moves you can give birth gloriously. No problem! Finding a care provider who is truly supportive of vaginal birth is key. ■ See references on page 14.

“ We need to share our empowered birth stories so women can be excited about birth instead of fearing it ”



Stephanie Larson, DFB, CD(DONA), CBE, BFA is the Creator and Founder of Dancing For Birth™. This dynamic leader is at the forefront of evidence-based birth practices, and has the daring to question the status quo, as well as the creative vision and expertise to take action. She is a renowned International Speaker (ICEA, Lamaze, CAPP, CAPP Canada, ICAN, DONA International, CIMS), and a mother of four.

Birth story

that is what everyone was hoping you would say."

I know I would have been declared failure to progress if I hadn't chosen this hospital and these nurses, which was known for patience and respect for a natural, normal labor. Your team matters so, so much.

It was officially show time when I told my doula I needed to use the restroom again. She read my face expertly and asked me to be checked. Pushing was satisfying to me, because the hardest part had been dealing with a feeling that my hips were being pressed apart, and pushing gave me something new to do to respond to that pressure. I pushed for about 30 minutes, and the second her head was born, I felt victorious.

I heard my doctor say, "shoulder ... nevermind, I got it." She rotated her body just right to save us a lot of drama, and out came all 8 lbs, 11 oz. of Natalie at 1:13 p.m. on August 1. I wept as I held her, bloody, against my chest. I remember repeating to my family, "I did it!"

I experienced a second degree tear, but it healed easily; my muscles were sore for about a week afterward, but I felt so strong. It was a healthy, alive feeling that I cherished. The recovery time was night and day compared to my cesarean. I reasoned that I sort of did the work before, rather than after.

Both my daughters' births were the most amazing days of my life. If you ask me whether a surgical delivery can be empowering, I say, absolutely. I was afraid during my cesarean because I was unprepared, and I didn't yet understand the gift that I received that day. As a second timer I was, and am, humbled by the process of birth. Experiencing it through a VBAC only intensified that. I feel strong and confident about myself as a result of this birth, but that feeling comes more from the emotional healing I uncovered through her pregnancy and birth, rather than by the exit route my baby took.

I am a huge proponent of VBAC, and this truly was a healing birth for me on many levels. But if someone finds themselves in my shoes, I would want them to know that a VBAC is not a do-over. Birth has the power to heal and transform, but we must do so while embracing our previous experiences, growing from them, and owning them. I learned to embrace any turn my birthing might take, whether that was finding a new birthplace, hearing the pulse-quickening word, "shoulder," or even ultimately delivering in an OR. This truly was the gift my daughter gave me – one of emotional healing and learning to find and use my own innate power. I am forever changed as a woman and a mother and a human. ■

“ I am forever changed as a woman ”

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