

GIVING BIRTH AT HOME

More women are choosing to avoid hospitals but a midwife shortage in the UK means there are not enough to go round, says TINA CASSIDY

RACHEL CARR-HILL had no intention of having her daughter Frieda, now two, in hospital as it was a place she associated with illness and dying.

But when she called for a midwife to come to her home in Hove, East Sussex, 12 hours after her first contraction, she was told there weren't any available at that time.

"I did ask what would happen if no one would be able to come out because I wasn't going to hospital unless there was an emergency," she says. "I didn't really get a clear answer but I trusted that the health authority would send someone out. If not, I was prepared to give birth on my own."

Fortunately it didn't come to that. Within three hours a midwife had arrived and helped Rachel deliver her daughter.

There is some evidence to suggest that Rachel is part of a growing number of women who prefer to give birth at home.

In 2005 there were 17,279 home births, 2,000 more than the previous year, according to the Office for National Statistics.

Last spring, after reviewing a body of evidence showing that a home birth is just as safe as a hospital birth for healthy women, Health Secretary Patricia Hewitt reversed the course of decades of Government policy that encouraged women to deliver in hospital.

But now some expectant mothers are shocked to find that in their hour of need there is no midwife available to come to their home. In fact, the National Childbirth Trust (NCT) says that it receives more complaints about this issue than any other.

In the UK there are about 25,000 midwives - 55 per cent of them working part-time - and another 10,000, at least, are needed to correct the shortfall.

THE Government is promising to provide one-on-one midwifery care by 2009 but the goal appears to be a lofty one as hospitals don't have the money to hire newly-minted midwives, local maternity units don't have enough staff to remain open continuously and those midwives already employed are so busy that they cannot break away to attend home births.

"A civilised society like ours should be able to provide care for an expectant mother and any woman can refuse to go to hospital," says Mary Newburn, head of policy research at the NCT. "Research has shown that women who give birth in hospital are more likely to have pain relief, have a caesarean section and have their baby in special care than those who have a home birth."

"But with midwives in short supply and a freeze on recruitment many cave in and go to hospital rather than risk going it alone."

If a midwife hadn't arrived, Rachel, 35, was prepared to give

birth unassisted, relying on Frieda's father and two friends to help her. She also looked into hiring an independent midwife working outside of the NHS but couldn't afford the fee - which averaged around £2,750.

The legalities surrounding the failure to provide a midwife are unclear. "To my knowledge there has not been a case tested in

court," adds Mary. "If a woman had given birth unassisted and the baby or mother was damaged, then it is likely the hospital or primary care trust that had failed to respond to her need for a midwife could be found negligent."

Humans are the only mammal species that relies on the help of others to give birth. We have narrow pelvises to support our

bodies as we walk upright and, because we are an intelligent species, a newborn's cranium is pretty big, making for a tight and tricky passage.

Anthropologists believe that with the advent of human consciousness, perhaps some two million years ago, labour triggered fear and a reflexive search for help, an adaptive behaviour that

yielded midwifery as we know it. In fact, many studies have shown that if women have supportive care with them from first contraction to final push their labour progresses more rapidly and with fewer complications.

Historically, when labour started, the mother would call together her "god-sibs": friends, neighbours, relatives and the local midwife - be she formally trained or merely experienced - to her side during the birth (this social scene even gave us the word "gossip"). A woman was almost never alone - or worried that she might be - when birth was imminent.

AS RECENTLY as a century ago, no respectable British woman would go to hospital to give birth. They were for charity patients, prostitutes and unwed mothers who, upon check-in, received group care, little privacy and morality lessons (no drinking, no card playing and no swearing, they were told).

The creation of the welfare state after the Second World War meant more women - the middle classes especially - gave birth in hospital.

This trend became more powerful with each passing decade until it killed off the powerful god-sib network.

However, in recent years, many women have become disillusioned with standard hospital maternity care, poor hospital hygiene and a system that yields high intervention and caesarean rates.

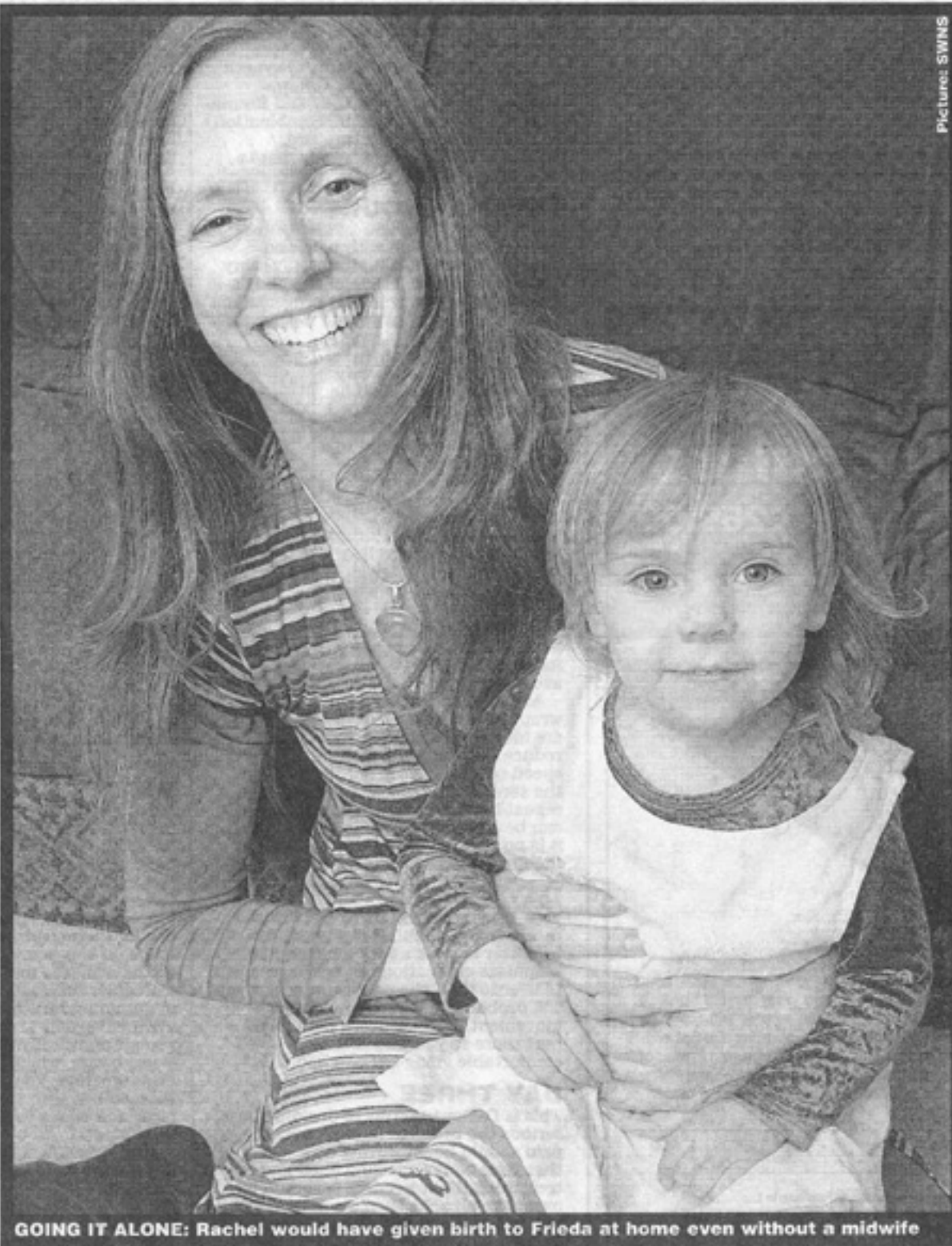
So, for those committed to home birth who cannot afford the guaranteed presence of an independent midwife, there is another idea: recruit a band of modern god-sibs. Women should form networks, build up a community with others who have given birth and know what to expect, just in case. Rachel heaps praise on her local Home Births Support Group, where she found like-minded women.

It is worth being aware, however, that it is illegal for an untrained person - for example, a partner - to deliberately act as a midwife (although occasionally people are forced to rise to the challenge when the baby comes quickly without notice).

Rachel says she was prepared fully to give birth unassisted if the midwife couldn't attend. "I'm not against medical intervention but I don't feel safe in hospitals," she says. "I don't think they're a good place to give birth. If I had another child, I would definitely choose a home birth again."

● To order a copy of *Birth: A History* by Tina Cassidy (Chatto & Windus, £12.99) with free UK delivery, call 0871 521 1301 (calls cost 10p/min from BT landlines) with your card details, or send a cheque payable to Express Newspapers to: The Express Bookshop, PO Box 260, Falmouth TR11 4WJ or order via expressbookshop.com

● National Childbirth Trust: 0870 444 8709/nct.org.uk



GOING IT ALONE: Rachel would have given birth to Frieda at home even without a midwife

Pictures: SWNS