

From maternity wing to divvy van: Mariska's story

When I gave birth to our son Callum on 27 January 2007, it was a time of great excitement to my husband and I, and our extended family.

After being married for six years – and having a fulfilling career working in PR and Communications with not-for-profits - no one was more excited than us when I fell pregnant, had a textbook pregnancy and a relatively easy birth.

The day after his birth, I had no idea that just five days later I would be being driven away from my home and my husband and newborn son in the back of a police divvy van.

In those first few days when I was learning to feed, bathe and care for my newborn and looking forward to bringing him home to his beautiful nursery, I had no idea that he would be six weeks old before I would finally come home, shell-shocked and traumatised by what had happened.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing, and looking back I should have been prepared, or at least been aware of the risks for me in giving birth to Callum.

You see, I have bipolar disorder. For me, this illness doesn't affect my day-to-day life. My history has been a handful of acute manic episodes over 17 years, brought on by stress and lack of sleep.

The first episode happened in December 1996, just after I finished year 12. Being somewhat of a high achiever and a perfectionist, I had pushed myself hard. When I became delusional, my mind racing a million miles an hour and I went days without sleep or much food, my parents took me to the family GP. Her explanation was that I had most likely been experimenting with drugs and she rolled her eyes when my parents stressed that that wasn't the case.

Searching for answers, I was taken to Dandenong Hospital for a cat scan to check for a brain tumour. When it became clear that it was a serious mental health issue, the CAT team treated me at home, my parents terrified of letting their 18 year old daughter be treated in a psych unit where I would be sharing a ward with men.

After two weeks on medication, I seemed to 'snap out' of my psychotic state and with Lithium, went on to start my double degree in Communications and Business at Monash University in March.

The years flew by and I married my high school sweetheart, Nathan, and graduated top of my class from Monash. During this time I stayed on a maintenance dose of Epilim, which wasn't a problem at the time as we were enjoying working and travelling and not planning on having children yet.

I actually didn't see a psychiatrist regularly until 2005, after a particularly severe episode. When he gave me permission to come off my medication and start

trying for a baby his parting words were “give me a call if there are any problems after you have the baby.”

And so, two years later when things started going pear shaped in the hospital, my husband hunted down his number and asked for help.

By then, I hadn't been able to sleep at all for two days and both Nathan and I knew I was becoming unwell.

Being in a private hospital, there were no psychiatrists on staff and my own barely remembered me and didn't have visiting rights to see me in the hospital.

I was scared and begged to see someone, but apart from a social worker who recommended I go home and 'take it easy', there was no one to help Nathan or I.

The hospital was adamant that my private health insurance wouldn't cover a longer stay. And so, when when Callum was six days old, Nathan bundled his delusional wife and newborn son into the car and drove home.

My sister later dropped in to bring some groceries, and found Nathan staring into space on the couch, so terrified about what was around the corner that he couldn't speak.

During the next couple of days condition took a dramatic turn for the worse. Unable to sleep, I became delusional.

When I tried to escape the house, Nathan chased me down the garden path and I tripped and sprained my wrist. In the midst of my pain and confusion, I believed he was trying to murder me and took Callum into the study, locked the door and rang the police.

When the police arrived, I was escorted outside and put in the back of a 'divvy' van. Still in pain after Callum's birth, I tried in vain to keep upright in the back of the van – and not breathe in the horrible stench of urine and vomit.

And so it was that I came to be locked up in the High Dependency Unit of a public hospital in Melbourne's outer eastern suburbs, sharing an open space with two men withdrawing from drugs, less than a week after giving birth.

I won't go into my experiences in this ward, but for a person who has grown up as a Christian and only attended a small private school, it was a huge culture shock.

At one point, unwell from mastitis and groggy from the medication I had been given, I was sick in the toilets. My mum who happened to be in my room and heard what happened, looked on in horror as the ward nurse shoved a mop and bucket into my hands and yelled at me to clean it up myself. A big change from the maternity ward that's for sure!

The worst part was being separated from my newborn son, who had been breastfed up until that point. I worried constantly about what was happening to him, and who had him.

When I was finally allowed out of the High Dependency Unit, Nathan brought Callum in to see me. We were allowed to visit in a small room, as Callum wasn't allowed on the ward.

Finally after three weeks in the public hospital psych unit I was to be transferred to a private psychiatric hospital.

To my delight, there I could enjoy visits with Callum in the privacy of my own room, rather than a conference room. Each day, Nathan brought Callum in to my room in his black carry-bed and spent hours there with me. I loved the feeling that people trusted me to look after my child.

A few days later, Nathan got the news he had been waiting for – a bed was available in a private mother-baby unit. With a double bed in the room, we could all be together at last. The nurses here treated me like a new mum again. With Callum tucked up in his little hospital cot, and Nathan sleeping beside me again, I felt happy at last.

I was finally told I wouldn't be able to breastfeed again, and so I stopped expressing breastmilk. The nurses helped me to learn how to bottle feed Callum the best way, offering all types of tips.

The unit that I was in was a mother-baby unit, with the majority of people there for their baby's sleep related issues. They were all so happy and chatty, a real change from the drugged up patients in the psych units. I couldn't bring myself to tell them why I was really there.

Despite this lingering feeling of shame, overall it was a very healing time for me. The nurses were kind and compassionate as I attempted to deal with what had happened and learnt to care for Callum.

Nathan ended up bringing in our beautiful white bassinet as we didn't want Callum to outgrow it before I had the chance to see him in it.

I felt so proud of my beautiful baby. I was able to take Callum for walks down to the shops, alone. An amazing feeling of freedom, after so many weeks of being told what I could and couldn't do.

After a couple of weeks of therapy and rehabilitation at the mother-baby-unit, I was allowed to go home! Although I was still on high doses of medication, I soon got into the swing of being at home with Callum and as the weeks and then months passed without a relapse, or any issues, my confidence in myself gradually returned.

When Callum was six weeks old I joined a mother's group, who are some of my closest friends now. But again, apart from murmuring that I had been in hospital for a while after Callum's birth, I felt the stigma of mental illness and didn't tell my new friends of the horrific time I had just been through.

By the time Callum turned one, life was well and truly back on track and we started thinking toward the future and the possibility having another baby.

We had always wanted a big family, and Callum had brought us so much joy. But at the same time, we had been through a terrible time and wanted to do everything we could to avoid going through anything like that again.

My new psychiatrist at the time, recommended I switch to a drug called Seroquel, and go see Professor Jayashri Kulkarni who was running a study into women taking Seroquel during pregnancy.

Feeling very worried that I might become unwell again, I had lots of questions for her. It was so reassuring to hear actual evidence of women who had given birth to healthy babies and stayed well while taking this medication.

Professor Kulkarni wrote me a letter outlining the steps she recommended I take to avoid having another relapse after my next baby, and also invited me to take part in the study once I became pregnant.

And so I weaned off Epilim and onto Seroquel. When to our delight I found out I was pregnant again a few months later, I weaned off the Seroquel until the final few weeks of my pregnancy when I went took it again.

When my psychiatrist sadly closed her practise, my new psychiatrist, she referred me to a new psychiatrist – and together we worked on an action plan in case I became unwell again.

Dr Lim gained visitation rights to a private hospital in Melbourne's outer eastern suburbs – with a psychiatric team on staff. She reassured Nathan and I that she would be available to us if anything went wrong again and gave us her mobile number to call in an emergency. I went on Seroquel about three weeks before Elliana's due date.

Elliana was born by c-section on 22 January 2009, five days before Callum turned two. She was breech and a very big baby at 4.7 kilograms (10 pound 4 ounces), something we had been told might be the case from research done by the mother-baby study.

Although it saddened me, I was not convinced there was enough research into the effects of Seroquel on breastfed babies, so I chose to bottle feed her. I did express a large amount of colostrum though, at 37 weeks pregnant before I went on the Seroquel, to feed her after her birth.

As lack of sleep is the trigger for my illness, an upside of bottle feeding was that Nathan was able to do all the night feeds for me for the first 3 weeks.

The night after Elliana was born I took a higher dose of Seroquel. With this in my system, I slept soundly and showed no signs of the insomnia that plagued me after Callum's birth.

I restricted visitors to immediate family and a couple of close friends, and rested as much as possible. I also checked Elliana into the nursery at night, so that I could sleep undisturbed.

The day we brought Elliana home was one of the happiest of my life. One of my regrets after Callum was born was that I didn't have a 'family' photo the day we brought him home. With Elliana I was determined to have one, despite it being 45 degrees.

Nathan did all the night feeds for the first two weeks before he returned to work. Once he did return to work, we did one night feed each. Despite having Seroquel in my system, I was still able to get up at night and feed her.

When Elliana was 11 months old I stumbled across some material from Professor Julkarni about National Register of Anti-Psychotic Medications in Pregnancy (NRAMP) study.

Deciding I would like to help other Mums worried about the effects of Seroquel on their baby, I decided to call and volunteer to be part of the study.

As Elliana was almost one (when the study usually ends) I did one very long interview over the phone, offering all Ellie's developmental milestones and information about myself.

Just one more!

Now having a delightful little boy and girl, we thought our family was done. I had always wanted a big family, but was thrilled with Callum and Elliana and - after all we had been through - didn't want to pressure Nathan to have another baby.

Imagine my surprise when Nathan came home from work one night and announced that he had been thinking about it, and he really wanted one more child. Loving motherhood and coping well with our one and three year olds, I quickly agreed and within a few months our next little one was on the way.

Before I fell pregnant, I went to see my psychiatrist, who was supportive of this decision and we decided to put the same action plan in place.

From early on in this pregnancy, I was determined to be part of the NRAMP study again. The study coordinator, Heather, remembered me and during our interviews was able to offer me support during my pregnancy.

In the early few months I suffered bad insomnia after stopping the Seroquel and had to go back on a very small dose of it to help with this. Heather happened to call for another interview, and could reassure me that other Mums had taken the drug throughout their pregnancy with no harm to their baby. It was wonderful to receive this reassurance and to hear about other women in my situation.

In my last trimester the insomnia returned and I had to take 25 mg of Seroquel a few times a week to help me sleep. Again, Heather was a source of comfort for me, as she told me other mums-to-be had done the same.

Knowing that the Seroquel had caused Elliana to become very big, I chose to have a scan which showed Isaac was also big. Not wanting any birth complications, Nathan and I decided I would have an elective c-section at 38 weeks.

Isaac Samuel Meldrum was born on the 2 February, 10 days after his sister's 2nd birthday and five days after his brother's 4th.

Isaac was perfectly healthy and was a very decent 9 pounds 3 ounces. I had expressed two days worth of colostrums for Isaac, and again chose to bottle-feed so that Nathan could assist me with night feeds the first two weeks.

I went on 100mg of Seroquel the night Isaac was born and stayed on it for the first week. After that I went down to 50mg and when he was four months old reduced this to 25mg.

Isaac is an alert, happy, content baby. He hits all his developmental milestones on time and is a wonderful addition to our family. I have stayed well, and am thrilled to have had no problems after Isaac's birth.

After the terrible time we endured after Callum's birth, we could easily have let fear stop us from having more children.

And looking at our Elliana and Isaac, I am so glad that we didn't.

For Nathan and I, taking part in the NRAMP study gave us the confidence to have more children, knowing that it was possible for me to stay well and have a healthy baby.

And for this we are very grateful.