

## Submission 10 - Clara White

I was extremely lucky in many ways when I had my twins to have many advantages stacked in my favour, including my parents in the state, generous parental leave for myself and my husband and not to be facing financial pressure. Despite all these things and more the first three months were extremely tough. I remember my three year old son telling a friend "mummy and daddy have been crying" and feeling so incredibly vulnerable.

One of my twins was particularly unsettled, and neither wanted to sleep except for when being held or worn in carriers. We all know sleep deprivation is a form of torture, and as much as I love my kids I did feel tortured during that time. Every minute was hard, I was often weepy, I was breastfeeding two babies and trying my hardest but felt I was failing my three children.

Rowan, my unsettled twin, would yell whenever he wasn't held or being fed. I felt fearful of how I would survive being home with both babies when my husband went back to work. My husband was also extremely mentally and physically depleted. When one baby wakes up multiple times a night it's exhausting but with two, who don't wake up at the same time, it's especially miserable.

Because Rowan was so unsettled it wasn't an option for me to do night feeds alone all the time, so I felt the guilt of waking my husband and also logistically it meant neither of us were well rested. Further exhausting me was the ongoing thought that maybe there was something I was missing with Rowan, was his tummy sore? Did he have a dairy intolerance?

I was lucky enough to get in to see a GP who had an interest in twins and newborns. It was luck as the practice was new, now I can't get an appointment for months. Even making appointments and getting there was a challenge, and felt pointless at times as I wondered if anyone could or would "do" anything. This doctor (Tim Jones, Glebe Hill Practice) was very helpful and an eventual lifeline. We determined Rowan was perfectly healthy, but just one of those unsettled babies you can be blessed with. It was so reassuring to have someone listen and reassure me he wasn't in pain, that there wasn't some chiropractor or anti colic medication that could fix him.

It was still incredibly tough though and while we had really tried to get the babies to sleep in their bassinets for naps during the day it was not successful and very demoralising. I knew that it wouldn't be sustainable for me to care for them solo during the day if I couldn't have any time to myself. That might seem like a luxury but this meant time to eat, wash myself and was sometimes my chance to go to the toilet.

We had begun the process of referral to the Mother Baby Unit, because my mum saw we were at rock bottom and encouraged me to call them. There really wasn't another option, I couldn't easily access any in-home care and there were no other

residential options. Dr Jones was involved with the Unit and gave me hope we would eventually get in, but every minute of the lead up felt almost unbearable as we were at breaking point.

This was another low point in personal vulnerability as I called the unit (as advised) and broke down in tears. The nurse agreed I should be admitted and suggested it would be soon. I heard nothing more for three long days, when I called back I was firmly reprimanded. I was told I must wait my turn and their beds were full. I felt so low in that moment, embarrassed and pathetic as I couldn't look after my own children. Everyone always says you should ask for help when things are hard and when I had asked, the door slammed in my face. I feel so deeply for those in this position now who have nowhere to turn. Despite how low I was through this process I was not referred to a mental health specialist, honestly I have no idea how I would have seen one but the fact no one raised my mental health does seem like a system failure.

When I did get admitted to the Mother Baby Unit, it was a huge relief, and it was a helpful reset for my family. Having said that, there were some real shortcomings of the facility. They seemed overburdened by the presence of my twins and I was told on several occasions it was hard for them to manage both. This was a bit alarming, if a trained nurse couldn't manage them, what hope was there for me? They would take them once they settled for the night but I was responsible for their care through the day, meaning I couldn't attend any of the activities in the facility as it was impossible with two 3 month old babies.

At one point they suggested a family member come over every night to help when I went home, and to come to the Unit too. My parents are very involved, but live an hour away and have their own lives, this hardly seemed practical. When my mum came in to visit me I was informed she was contravening visiting hours that were never previously mentioned. At one point when I expressed the challenges of how hard it was to have twins and how despite loving them I often wished I had just one baby the nurse said "well you can't put one back in now!" True, but not helpful. Once again I wasn't offered any mental health support.

After a week I left the Mother Baby Unit with a bit more confidence, and babies that would sleep by themselves, at least a bit. This wasn't the end of the story, but I am endeavouring to keep this submission somewhat brief. This experience really makes me wonder how "bad" the situation would need to be to get support based on the psychological state of the mother/parent. We were admitted to the Unit for "unsettled babies" and there wouldn't be any service to help us now.

I'd take the imperfect unit over nothing every time but I hope for more, can we make a better system that offers real help to parents in crisis? Those facing even more challenging situations than us, who lack the support of a partner, whose baby is

medically complex, who face financial challenges and the many other things that make life even tougher? I really believe we must do better to help people through a time that can be so challenging and can have such a profound impact on children and families.

I wanted to sum up with some touch points I think are important:

- Could counselling be offered to people who receive unexpected news about their pregnancy? Obviously learning you're expecting twins is a huge joy in many ways but it also has a big impact on what your pregnancy and experience of parenthood would look like. You can never be fully prepared but I wish I'd been more prepared.
- Why in the public system do pregnant people whose pregnancy is deemed high risk not have access to continuity of care, when evidence shows the importance of continuity of care? I saw a different doctor each time and ended up seeking a private obstetrician because it was so stressful to receive contradictory information and not be sure they knew my history.
- When you do need to be referred to another service, how can we make the system straight forward and give people dignity? When it is so hard to get a GP appointment and that can be just the first step to help this means it is a very time consuming process and requires you to repeat information, often to people you have just met.
- How can we create a well resourced residential offering for families struggling in the first year? How can we ensure it is adequately staffed with well trained professionals who provide consistent and caring support?
- What care can be provided in-between a residential stay and a short GP or child health nurse visit. What care can be provided at home? The Parenting Centre were very helpful to me and came to my house to help and give advice, this was invaluable but not widely known about.

Thank you for taking the time to read this far. I hope you can tell from what I have written how challenging this experience was and why I felt the need to share my story. I really hope that I was able to show the shortcomings in the system and some bright points that made a huge difference to my family.