

Life and death in one room

Laura Byrne, a US On Tracker,
has just returned from working
at Multan Christian Hospital,
Pakistan

During my time at Multan Christian Hospital I frequently used to go into the labour room and ask, in my rudimentary Urdu, "Any breech babies?" "Any twins?"

One of the things that I was most eager to do during my time in Pakistan was to learn how to tackle these situations, and while I've had a couple of chances to participate in breech deliveries, the twins have been more elusive. Every morning my eager inquiries as to the presence of an impending twin delivery received a head shake and a reply of "Not today."

Then, finally, the midwives greeted me with huge grins and the news that they had just admitted a woman with twins. Five hours later, one of the senior midwives walked me through the challenging process of delivering the twins. I can't think of many things in life as joyful as the moment when a baby first enters the world and lets out its first robust cry. Every healthy birth that I have seen has been that way – miraculous and full of wonder. But the birth of these two baby girls – my first set of twins – was particularly special to me, and when they were both safely delivered, I looked up at the mother with a smile, expecting her to be lit up in the way that new mothers are: completely given over to relief and awe at these wonderful new people that she had brought into the world. Instead, the mother of the twins had her face in her hands and was shaking her head, and her female relative who had come to be with her during the delivery was ranting

angrily in Urdu. I looked inquiringly at the midwife who explained that the mother and her sister-in-law were very sad because now the mother had three daughters and no sons. For the next fifteen minutes, as I helped clean up and get the woman settled, I watched as the mother-in-law entered and proceeded to join in the sister-in-law's angry tirade towards the mother who sat limply in bed with a defeated expression on her face, knowing that she had failed twice over because neither of her twins had been the desired son.

My initial response was anger – that these two perfect and beautiful babies would enter a world in which their own mother and grandmother see them as signs of failure. But my anger gradually faded. It's not their fault – these women have received so little respect themselves that they are unable to see the value in a female child, in their own daughters. They

are taught to measure their successes by the sons they produce. Life as a woman is not easy here. I've lost count of the number of women who have come to the clinic after 3, 5, even 12 miscarriages or after anything from 3 to 17 years of infertility. They look at me with despair in their eyes and say, "If I don't give my husband a son, he will divorce me" or "He will take

another wife." I've also lost track of the number of second wives who have come in bowed under the pressure of producing the son that the first wife failed to produce and chafing under the bitterness of the first wife who strives to make the new wife's life as difficult as possible.

The occupation of helping women through childbirth is an emotional roller coaster: a woman goes through the worst pain of her life and then, suddenly, the pain is replaced by utter joy. In one room a baby takes its first breath, and in another room, a baby

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who will never draw breath enters the world lifeless. One woman cries as she hears her baby's heartbeat for the first time, and in the room next to her, a woman cries as she learns that her baby's heart has stopped beating. Last week the doctor and I came to two women who were in adjacent beds. In one bed was a woman who after seven unsuccessful pregnancies and after spending three months in a hospital bed had finally given birth to a son. She held that baby as though he were the most priceless treasure in the world and looked up at me with a face lit by absolute joy. With the advent of that baby boy the very real threat of divorce had instantly dissolved. In the bed next to her was a woman who had had nine miscarriages but was now exactly six

months pregnant and who, before today, would smile delightedly up at me every morning as her belly slowly swelled. This morning, however, the woman wasn't smiling. Reluctantly, she confessed to us that she'd had contractions all night. By the time she acknowledged it she was in full labour, and she went on to give birth to the 24 week baby. In Pakistan, this baby didn't have a chance. It was too much to look at these two women: the one gazing down at her new son as though every dream had been fulfilled; the other staring down at her hands, her face empty of hope.

I haven't come up with any answers for why babies are born into a world that doesn't want them, but I do know that one of the greatest

privileges of being here in Pakistan is being able to minister to their mothers. The greatest wonder of our Christian faith is Emmanuel – God wondrously and unexplainably with us, sharing in the good parts of life – friendships and family, new births, worship, fulfilled dreams. But God also undeniably with us in the disappointments, in sickness, in broken relationships, even in death. In the meantime, I hope that these disappointed mothers will learn to love their daughters. I hope that the twins will have a better life than their mother has had – a life in which they are cherished for who they are. And I hope that all of them can come to know the love of the One who formed them and who will one day wipe away our tears for good. ■



Laura with two of the babies she helped bring into the world