

An update from Midwives Exclusive: The Life of a
Midwife in lockdown
Heather Pieterse 2/5/2020

“Coronials” = the new generation of babies who are born during the Covid pandemic

Covid crept up on us like a cold distant mist in the horizon as we basked in the sun thinking how scary and unfortunate it was for those poor people in Wuhan Province, China. Then the tentacles spread; Iran, Italy, Germany, Spain, UK, France, USA and we realized it would inevitably reach South Africa. The midwife stories we were hearing in China, Europe, America and UK would gradually become our own. We have been fortunate to have been able to learn from those before us in the Northern Hemisphere and we've had time to make the changes necessary to try and protect everyone including ourselves in our practice.

It's a difficult time to be pregnant for sure as there is so much unknown. Fear of illness, that your partner can't be with you, pressure to change your birth plan. Disappointment that you cannot have your stork tea as planned. Sadness that granny and grandpa can't meet your baby or visit in hospital or may not be able to travel by air to support you in this time. Financial stress aplenty. We understand and we are so committed to supporting you through this even as you navigate all the changes that keep being thrown your way as you give birth to your little Coronial baby.

For those like us at Midwives Exclusive, who are dealing with this directly, the changes and guidelines keep coming, they keep changing. Daily things change and it's very hard to keep up with it all. It's overwhelming and scary but we have to keep learning, reading, checking and adapting.

It is hard to keep positive if I am being honest. It's hard to leave your house knowing whilst you are at home and isolated you are safe and you are not exposing your family to potential risk. I learned very early on to regulate the amount of media updates on Covid around the world in order to keep my mind set more positive.

It's hard to come home after being at a birth or a day of consults knowing you are the 'weakest link' to your family. We have a strict protocol we follow when returning home. Don't enter until you have changed your clothes, put on other shoes, scrubbed your arms down and anything else. Dirty clothes into a sealed plastic bag and shoes sprayed down with disinfectant and left outside. No kisses or hugs. It's equally hard for those who go home alone to no one waiting for them, no one to offer support and understanding. It's hard indeed but we are adapting and most of all we have a great collective sense of humour which keeps us afloat.

Some of our challenges at Midwives Exclusive are ironically some of our strengths. We do births at not only the birth house but also home as well as Femina and Wilgers. This is generally great for us but currently quite complex too. Wilgers and Femina are swiftly and efficiently updating and doing everything to protect themselves and their patients too. I get daily emails and what's apps with new requests and guidelines that we need to incorporate for the safety of all. Not all of the new protocols are easy ones but they are necessary and made for the safety of all. For example: It's horrible to tell our couples that dad as well as anyone else may no longer visit after the birth. Daily we worry what new safety features will be given to us in terms of hospital protocol. We adapt and understand that everyone has to do what they can in this time.

We also do home visits and births which is also a challenge of another nature where we enter your homes posing risk to you that are locked down and possibly risk to ourselves when you have not been in lockdown strictly.

At the birth house we continue to follow the international guidelines set by those who have already hit their curve and seem to be doing well keeping up with the changes.

On the up side, a midwife's main strength would probably have to be adaptability as one could not easily survive without this core strength.

In the beginning it felt like we were being a little overdramatic at our practice with the safety steps we took. Thinking back I chuckle as I really think my staff all thought I'd lost the plot a little in the early days as I was implementing changes and getting fiercer and fiercer about them following these changes. I noticed a few raised eyes and strange looks when I started getting all 'strict' on them.

I'd like to think that ultimately they appreciate my concerns for their safety though. 😊

We are doing our best to keep everyone safe but we still don't have all the PPE we need just like most medical people all over the world.

We've ordered N95 masks and paid big money only to find out the company's stock was stuck at customs. (no refund yet.....)

We've ordered more and, luckily, not paid the money this time also only to find out their stock is also stuck at customs.

We have theatre gowns being made for us and cute caps to cover our hair.

Masks have become quite the fashion statement but as with stiletto shoes, will never be very comfortable even if they look good. We must have been through about 20 different interesting creations as we tried to find the most effective and comfy mask we could for 6 – 8 – 12 hours of continuous wear. This was quite something to adjust to and for those of you who are just starting to mask up, you do get used to it, so persevere. Our ears may never look the same but that's a small sacrifice. We have visors to wear when screening or dealing with those in labour. (also much easier for those who wear glasses btw)

The women and partners coming in for consults are all requested to wear masks and we've also requested they come alone (the 2 of them) for consults and not bring the kids and others as the risk for them is great.

We have asked people coming for consults to wait in the car until we come and fetch them and do screening incl your temperature.

We are implementing reminder phone calls for appointments which include a telephonic screening and if you have any cold like symptoms etc we'll be asking you to rather postpone your appointment until you feel better. Midwives will be doing some thorough telephonic consultations too during this time as we don't want you to feel neglected with the consult schedule which is a little further spread out than before.

Our consults are being done outside under the lapa (which is actually really lovely and relaxed) with the physical check up, close contact time inside, being limited. This has worked out quite well actually. Not sure what we are going to do in winter but for now we'll stay outside as long as we can.

It's hard not to give a hug to you as we greet your or shake your hand. We are so tactile and it just feels so wrong but yet again, we are adjusting.

Lockdown (level 5) seemed to have rushed by for me in all honesty as it was only the midwives and Marthie (doula/ educator) who was essential worker registered. The admin ladies worked from home as best as they could doing a great job but in reality the practical day to day was left to the midwives and Marthie. Cleaning, sanitizing, washing, ironing, food preparation, stock control, opening and closing the gate, welcoming couples in, walking

them out, making follow up appointments, cash handling and gardening all fell to the midwife on duty that day (and Marthie) which was a huge responsibility above the actual midwife care.

On the whole everyone was really patient and gentle with us midwives as we often bumbled our way through the above list finally figuring out the credit card machine etc. Thank you for that.

Birth kept us busy in the times when we were not cleaning, cooking, ironing, consulting etc. During the lock down (level 5) period we had 23 births.

Quite a number of these took place at the birth house due to women being nervous of birthing in hospital during Covid but probably more due to the fear of their partners not being able to stay with them after birth until discharge. One weekend we had 6 babies born at the birth house over a 2 day period - 3 of them being on the Sunday afternoon.

Birthing as we go forward: we have to triage each individual case based on the screening of both the woman who is in labour as well as her birth support person. Patient + partner must be screened and deemed low risk.

This screening is done telephonically in early labour as well as on arrival at either the hospital/birth house or home.

Signs being cold/sore throat/fever/cough/loss of taste/shortness of breath/lethargy(very tired) or who have had close contact with someone who has been diagnosed with Coronavirus or who works in a hospital + abnormally high temperature

- Low risk – those who are healthy with **no signs or screen negative** to all screening questions or present with a recent negative Covid test result. GREEN
- Medium risk – have **some signs or positive screening** answers but haven't been tested – must be sent for testing and treated as medium risk, YELLOW, and cared for as if they are potentially positive for the safety sake of everyone.
- High risk – unwell, awaiting test results or positive screening, have been in close contact with – need to be treated as potential positive and cared for in RED area or high risk area with everyone wearing appropriate protective equipment.

Hospital Birth:

Wilgers expects all patients and their partners to be tested for Covid and arrive with a negative result in labour (done within a few days of birth) otherwise they are cared for in the Yellow/medium risk area until results return. People who have not tested will be sent for testing in labour (partner included).

Femina is still just screening patients thoroughly and not doing universal testing as yet.

All must wear masks when entering and throughout their stay in hospital including patient in labour and her partner.

The midwife is expected to provide services in labour with a mask on as well as a visor for the actual birth + plastic apron even if the patient is low risk.

For a patient who is medium or high risk further measures for safety are implemented which includes sending you for testing then caring for you in a birth room specifically demarcated for medium or high risk. The midwife will be in full protective equipment including cap, shoe covers, theatre gown, N95 mask, apron, double gloves and visor to protect her eyes. She will remain with you from admission until after your baby is born and you leave for home when she can doff (take off her PPE)

For medium and high risk patients the recommendation is not to birth in the water as the midwife will be in full PPE but you can use the water for pain relief and relaxation when available and appropriate. This should be discussed with your midwife.

If your partner is sick or has any positive screening they will not be permitted to enter and support you in labour but will be sent for testing and once the results prove negative they will be allowed in.

Low risk partners are still encouraged to accompany their partners in labour for support in hospitals but do still need to leave around 2 hours after birth and no visiting is allowed until discharge when you collect mom and baby. Only one birth support person allowed. No doula's or photographers.

At hospitals, the birth house and homebirth we follow this same triage system which is really for safety of all at all times and not in any way meant to be mean or ruin birth experiences but rather set to save lives and prevent the spread of Covid which is really easy to contract.

The birth house or home:

we are still happy to welcome doula's whom we work with regularly and also do the full screening / mask wearing etc and our usual photographers we work with for birth photography. We really don't encourage other children and elderly parents to come with you due to the increased risk they present to us and the risk we present to them.

In early labour the midwife will be doing a telephonic thorough screening and may request you and your partner to quickly go and get tested prior to active labour if she has concerns. If you do test positive or arrive unwell at the birth house we will have to transfer you to hospital for birth due to the high risk in labour for someone who has decreased lung capacity.

If you are well and your partner is not well we will request he does not come in for labour but can remain outside after going to get tested.

Obviously each case is taken as an individual.

All in all our care remains the same but the room and clothing the midwife will wear may change somewhat.

Our postnatal care and support remains the same although we will do screening prior to visiting as mentioned.

This is very overwhelming but I can assure you that we are doing everything we possibly can to keep you healthy and well and also to ensure you have the best possible experience in this difficult time of change.

Please feel free to contact your midwife to discuss any of these above details in more depth.

To end off and try and keep spirits up:

It's certainly not all doom and gloom, there is still laughter and community. We are learning to talk to one another again and we are learning to share. We definitely are all learning not to plan too far ahead and take it one day at a time. We're saving money on unnecessary purchases and some are getting fitter than ever, learning to cook and in my case I've even learnt how to use a sewing machine and am sewing masks to give out as a community project.

We are playing card monopoly, sitting on the lawn enjoying the sunshine in the late afternoon, baking bread, watching old family videos and connecting like we haven't for some time. We are appreciating our health which we have taken for granted. We are appreciating being allowed out from 6h00 – 9h00 for a walk with the dogs. It's not all bad at all.

The future is unclear, it may be scary too but we are 100% committed to being there and keeping ahead in doing everything we can to keep the families in our care safe and happy.

We are so serious about helping you to have incredible births in this crazy time. We are also seriously doing everything we can to keep ourselves healthy as we know we can't help you if we are not.

Thank you for all your support, messages just letting us know you are thinking of us, for offering to make masks for us and sending us links to people who can supply us with PPE Your little thoughtful gestures like bringing us snacks at consults or coffee are keeping us going.

Stay safe, think before you do and know that we will get through this together.
Heather