I would like to talk about fear and phobias, specifically the fear of sharks. Sharks scare me. As a child, they scared me so much that I developed a phobia of any body of water where I couldn't see the bottom. I'm a grown man of over 30 now, but dark and foreboding waters still strike me motionless. It takes a good 15 minutes of pep talk to ready me for a swim in a pond.

Fear and phobias by definition are irrational. It would make absolutely no difference if a scientist in a white coat came up to me and said, “Tony, I can assure you that a great white shark cannot survive in a pond.” In the logical part of my mind, I know there are no monsters lurking in that man-made hole in the ground. In another part of my mind, however, science could be wrong this one time, and some mutant great-white shark/salamander hybrid could rise from its dormancy in that blue-green pool of death and bite me in half.

Everyone experiences fear. Furthermore, everyone fears different things, and these fears can lead to difficulties.

I spend a lot of time reading about fathers and birth. My wife asked me to relate my thoughts on fear and phobias to the role of fathers in the birth process, specifically regarding VBACs (vaginal birth after cesarean). Her request seemed like a good chance do something useful with my research and possibly help people who are indeed struggling with a serious situation.

My wife's first VBAC was with the birth of my first child. Since fathers who have fears or doubts about their wife’s VBAC most likely have experienced a prior c-section, my situation was a bit different. I believe that the mother should have freedom to choose the type of birth she wants, and then it is up to the father to decide what part he is to play in her choice. I completely trusted my wife's decision for a VBAC. Once the decision was made, I had to ask myself if I had any fears or doubts and specifically what they were.

My fears seemed to be the general fears of a first-time father, not the more specific fears that second- and third-time fathers have. Since my experiences were not sufficient enough to draw any logic-shattering conclusions, I started researching fathers’ fears about VBACs specifically.

The first observation I made was that fathers’ fears of danger during a VBAC are not related to where the birth takes place, be it home or hospital. The most common fear is that a uterine rupture will occur. This is when the uterus tears or breaks open, which can possibly lead to the death of the mother and/or baby.

Here are some statistics: In the US the actual cesarean rate hovers around 33%, depending on which part of the country you live in. After a mother has a c-section, uterine rupture is the most commonly cited risk by most physicians concerning VBACs. Of the women who choose VBAC, 0.4–1.9% (num-
bers may vary a bit) of those have a chance of uterine rupture, and only 6% of those 0.4–1.9% possible ruptures can be potentially fatal to the mother or child. There is some math here that tells me the chances for death in a VBAC are pretty small when I consider its most prevalent risk factor. I could even cite studies that show that the increased risk of infection from a repeat cesarean can have a higher rate of fatality than complications from a VBAC.

And now we come back to sharks. The statistics I just listed are mostly worthless to fathers who have fears about their wives having a VBAC. If I used those statistics to try to show fathers that their fear can be put aside by some logical and rational reasoning, then I would be that scientist insisting that there is no shark/salamander hybrid waiting for me in a pond. If logic and reasoning were sufficient tools for dispelling fear, then fear would not have such an influence on how we feel.

Is there a sufficient tool for dispelling fears? It turns out that almost all people, both men and women, have another sometimes irrational trait that can be useful for this very purpose: stubbornness. Fight fire with fire and irrational with irrational. For example, in the end, sharks be damned, I jump in water where I can’t see the bottom. I always come to the same conclusion: I refuse to let fear dictate my actions. I don’t feel ashamed for having fear, but I feel ashamed when I let it control my actions.

I believe that the mother should have freedom to choose the type of birth she wants, and then it is up to the father to decide what part he is to play in her choice.

Even though my shark phobia may seem quaint in the grand scheme of things, the process and situation is still the same. I do have real fears, like the thought of my kids growing up without me due to death or other such circumstances. However, I approach that fear the same way as my phobia of deep water. Dark ponds are my learning tool—I face that fear the same way that I face all my other legitimate and illegitimate fears. I don’t let it hinder my actions or dictate what needs to be done. As the scientist in the lab coat would say, fear should not influence decisions, legitimate or not.

When my wife had her first VBAC, did I fear the known and unknown? Yes. However, it was the same momentary hesitation I feel when I put my kids in the car to go somewhere. Technically, we could get into an accident. However, I can’t just sit around the house and not go anywhere; that would be crazy. Something bad could happen during a VBAC, just like I could get into a car accident. But not supporting a mother who wishes to have a VBAC (or use a midwife or have a homebirth or...) is just as crazy as not going on a Sunday drive for fear of what could go wrong.

Tony Whitman’s experience with his wife’s VBAC greatly affected him. He now researches the interactions of fathers at childbirth. He just finished a book on this subject called, The Birthing Hour.

---

Red Moon Herbs invites you to the 8th Annual Southeast Women’s Herbal Conference October 12-14, at Lake Eden in Black Mountain, NC

A weekend dedicated to the Wise Woman Tradition—earth-based healing, local plants, and deep nourishment

Bevin Clare  ALisa Starkweather  Aviva Romm, MD  Kathleen Maier  Amoke Awele Kubat

Over 35 teachers and more than 70 classes on: herbs, women’s health, nourishing foods, empowerment, spirituality, sexuality, & do-it-yourself medicine.

www.seewisewomen.com  *  877-SEWOMEN

www.midwiferytoday.com  Midwifery Today  Autumn 2012  21