Description



Seahorse follows a journey of fertility treatment, pregnancy, and birth. At first glance, a common and ordinary story. This film, however, follows the brave journey of transgender man Freddy McConnell through fertility, pregnancy, and birth – the title a nod to the fact that it is

the male seahorse that births, not the female. This animal has become a symbol of trans pregnancy. This film provides an honest insight into the emotional and physical strains of pregnancy and childbirth beyond the societal norms of female pregnancy.

Freddy is a 30-year-old transgender man who decided to pause his testosterone treatment in favour of folic acid as he opts for fertility treatment, having made the choice to carry his baby himself. *Seahorse* provides the opportunity for viewers to experience this intimate story, sharing the moments of joy and challenge alongside him. A quite unique chance to see this transformational journey through the eyes of another.

> *Seahorse* provides the viewer with an insight into the challenges of a transgender man navigating a woman-focussed, cis-focussed system

In a society built for cisgender individuals (a person who identifies with the same gender they were assigned at birth) and where transness is widely misunderstood and misrepresented in the media, *Seahorse* provides the viewer with an insight into the challenges of a transgender man navigating a woman-focussed, cis-focussed system. So often, the public narrative surrounding trans identity is portrayed through a cis lens; this film provides the rare privilege of witnessing raw, lived experience. An undeniable and uncompromising truth that cannot be ignored. Remaining focussed on Freddy as the protagonist of his own pregnancy journey is an asset, forcing the viewer to focus purely on Freddy's personal experience. In not permitting spectator intrigue of external reactions to overrule, the central voice of this narrative is highlighted.

Freddy explains, *"This is a film about me having a baby, but what I feel like I'm going through isn't me having a baby, or pregnancy. It's a much more fundamental sort of total loss of myself. I just want to close my eyes and be on the other side of this."* Freddy's experience highlights the fact that trans pregnancy is not just the challenges of navigating a system not set up to include trans birthing people automatically, but also the challenges of navigating the changes in themselves. A loss of self is frequently associated with parenthood, however, this loss can be particularly strong for those who have transitioned. Freddy acknowledges the mental challenges to come at the beginning of his journey, though is optimistic from reassurance that physical changes are unlikely to occur for six months to a year. Dysphoria is not exclusive to trans male pregnancies, nor is it universal to trans male pregnancy. Following Freddy's experience of ceasing testosterone treatment, he describes feeling "soft", and recognises his ability to share his emotions more, recognising the psycho-emotional challenges pregnancy has brought. All pregnancies are distinctive; equally, all trans pregnancies are unique. As healthcare professionals, we must be mindful of this uniqueness in the care we provide to any pregnant person, including transmen, who are accessing care.

> A necessary discomfort to highlight the difficulties and challenges faced by those experiencing pregnancy and birth as a trans individual

The normal hopes and fears of a parent-to-be were juxtaposed with the moments of palpable discomfort when the hopes and fears, specific to Freddy's pregnancy, arose; the assumptions made by those around Freddy, the system, the paperwork. With a group of mothers sat round the table offering their cis, woman-focussed advice, the viewer sits with Freddy in the discomfort of the suggestions being made, inappropriate to Freddy's needs. Inappropriate advice and misinformation is a theme throughout the film, with Freddy highlighting the incorrect information on fertility he had been provided upon his transition, his main source of information being YouTube videos from other trans Dads. A necessary discomfort to highlight the difficulties and challenges faced by those experiencing pregnancy and birth as a trans individual, highlighting that which is taken for granted by so many: appropriate pregnancy clothing, the language used in written documentation…

We see very little of Freddy's postnatal period. Reflecting on his birth experience, Freddy indicates surprise at the extent of the transformational nature of the birth experience. As a healthcare professional, knowing that care and support within the postnatal period is often termed a 'Cinderella service', with the quality of care provided being much poorer than across other parts of the perinatal period.[1] Given this is the case for those in positions of privilege within the healthcare system, experiencing that alongside Freddy would have been an additional learning point.

This film is essential watching for anyone working with and encountering birthing people. As healthcare professionals, what can we learn from Freddy's experiences?

1. It is not for us to tell trans birthing people what they need. Hold a safe space for each birthing person to offer their

needs before considering how you can best facilitate and support them.
2. Have awareness. By the time Freddy reached midwifery and antenatal care, this journey had already been a long one. Things that might seem small, such as a misgendering on paperwork, assumptions at reception desks or mutterings overheard between colleagues, can all have a large impact.
3. As healthcare professionals, we are in a privileged position to advocate for change. Some of the challenges experienced by Freddy have a solution if they are highlighted in practice, such as changing paperwork, guidance, and IT systems to be inclusive.
4. Individualised care is for everyone. It reaches beyond the norms of those accessing maternity care, to every birthing person.

This screening was hosted online by *The Queer Birth Club*, as part of Pride month celebrations, followed by a webinar hosted by *The Queer Birth Club* with Freddy McConnell and Ryan Sanderson. All funds raised from the screening have been donated to Freddy's not-for-profit organisation Equality for Trans Families, which campaigns for legal recognition and equality for families with trans parents in the UK. *The Queer Birth Club* offer training for birth workers in LGBTQ+ competency.

Seahorse: The Dad who gave birth is available to watch via the *Seahorse* film website.

References

1. Barker K. Cinderella of the services – 'the pantomime of postnatal care'. *British Journal of Midwifery*. 2014; 21(12). doi: 10.12968/bjom.2013.21.12.842

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