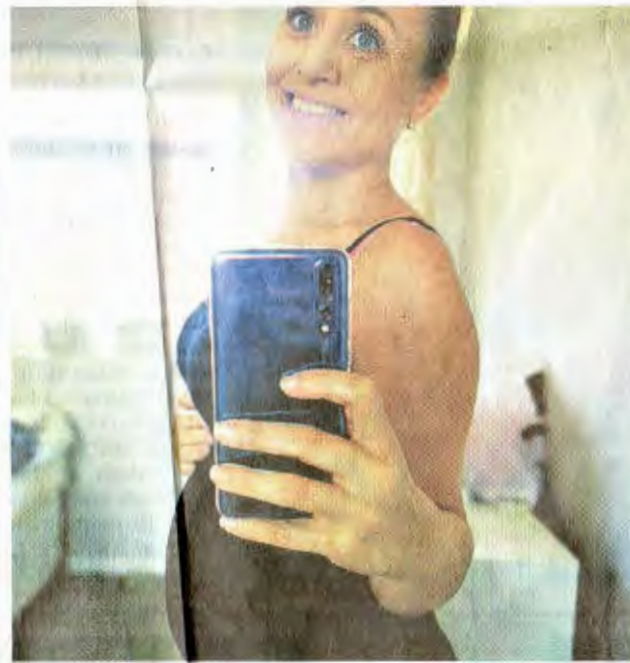


Bethan Simpson, left, and her 20-week scan at Broomfield Hospital in Chelmsford, Essex, which showed her baby had spina bifida. Below, Ms Simpson after having corrective surgery



Baby removed from womb for spine surgery then put back

By Henry Bodkin
SCIENCE CORRESPONDENT

AN UNBORN baby was removed from its mother's womb for life-changing surgery before being put safely back inside, her mother has revealed.

Surgeons performed the pioneering operation at 24 weeks' gestation after scans showed the foetus had spina bifida. The condition can leave sufferers with walking difficulties and sometimes paralysis because the spinal cord does not fully develop during pregnancy.

Surgeons from University College London and Great Ormond Street hospital, along with Belgium colleagues, managed to repair the spinal cord and it is now hoped the baby will be born healthily in April. It is believed to be only the fourth time the operation has been attempted in the UK.

Initially the parents, Bethan Simpson, 26, and her husband Kieron, were told they could terminate the pregnancy or continue without any intervention. But at a later appointment, they were offered foetal surgery.

"We agreed to do it," she said. "Baby and I went through amniotic fluid tests, MRIs and relentless scans. We got approved and we planned for surgery. Our lives were such a rollercoaster for the next few weeks."

Ms Simpson, a nurse, said: "Sadly 80 per cent of babies in England are terminated when their parents are told their baby has this condition.

"It's not a death sentence. She has the same potential as every one of us.

"Yes, there are risks of things going wrong but please think more about spina bifida, it's not what it used to be."

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