

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Mrs Michelle Purdon

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Partially
Confidential

On the [redacted] I presented at the [redacted] Hospital Birthing Unit in active labor with my first baby, [redacted]. I was with my husband, "Chris" and we were both excited for the imminent birth of our little girl. We had already presented to hospital earlier that day and had been assessed and sent home to wait for labor to progress further.

It was approximately 1700 when we presented for the second time. We were sent to a very public waiting area where another lady was waiting to be seen. We were left to wait approximately 20 minutes before being taken to an assessment room. In this time I was having strong and painful contractions and I felt quite conscious of the fact that I was in a room with a stranger while this was happening.

After I was assessed and determined to be in active labor I was taken into a birthing room. My labor progressed relatively normally over the next hour or two and contractions continued to build and come closer together. My Mum came into the hospital and joined my husband as a support person. This was welcome as the midwife was spending very minimal time in the room with us, I assume as it was busy.

At approximately 1930 I entered the "transition" phase of labor. Being my first baby, I became quite distressed and overwhelmed with the pain and intensity of the contractions. My midwife, rather than showing support and helping me through this, instead responded with smart comments and obvious disdain toward my pain and the way I was handling this.

When it came time to push, I delivered [redacted] quite quickly. After delivery my midwife examined me and told me I had quite a severe tear. She seemed incredibly inconvenienced by this. While waiting for the doctor to arrive after delivery she took it upon herself to attempt to suture the tear on her own while I was still on the bed. Thankfully the doctor walked in during this and was shocked that the midwife was attempting to repair the tear. As it turned out I had sustained a 3C tear that required surgical repair. I dread to think of the long term consequences had the midwife completed the tear repair herself.

While waiting for theatre to become available my legs were placed in stirrups and were kept that way. People came in and out of the room and the door was kept open the whole time. I had no privacy or dignity at all. After a while, I needed to use the toilet and I wanted a shower. I was told I would be fine to get up and go. Nobody assisted me, other than my husband. When I got up I felt quite lightheaded and when I got to the bathroom I completely passed out. My husband had to hit the emergency buzzer to get the attention of staff. He has said that in this time, he thought that I was dying and he was terrified he would be raising the baby on his own. The room was full of blood and even though this was never recorded anywhere I am certain that I had a postpartum hemorrhage that was not managed.

Shortly after my collapse I went to theatre. The surgical repair went well and it is one aspect of the whole birth that I can positively say had a good outcome. However, after the surgery was completed I was sent to recovery. In recovery I was separated from my baby for a further period of time, a situation that in my opinion is completely avoidable and can quite easily be

managed. It is not my problem, or my babies problem, that the hospital does not have sufficient staffing to allow mums to have their babies with them in recovery after surgery. I remember feeling completely shell-shocked by what happened to me and all I wanted was my baby. I know that being separated affected my ability to bond with my daughter, still to this day.

After recovery I was taken to the maternity ward for postpartum care. My experience here was also disgraceful. It was 3am and my husband was sent home. I was unable to lift or move my baby due to the surgery and I had nobody to help me with this. I was very unsettled through the night. In the morning I was expected to get up and walk to a room where breakfast was served. I did not realize this and missed out on food. I also didn't have anything to eat the night prior. When I pointed out to the nurse that I was unable to walk, she said she would try and find me some food. She came back with a packet of weet-bix. I had to wait for my husband to come in to eat something substantive.

I spent three nights in total on the maternity ward and in summary:

- I continued to heavily bleed onto the bedding. Nobody assisted with changing sheets or bedding. When my husband came in on the first morning I was lying in a pool of my own blood.
- My cannula site became red and inflamed. Despite pointing this out nobody fixed this and my friend who is a nurse who came in to visit ended up removing it for me as she was concerned it was becoming infected.
- Breastfeeding support was limited. I wanted to attend a breastfeeding class but this was cancelled.

Postnatally there was very limited support. I had a few home visits from midwives and followed up with my GP but nobody truly understood how traumatic my experience was. I was repeatedly told that my baby was healthy and that was the main thing. I was told I would feel better once I was getting more sleep. My feelings and experience were frequently dismissed. It was a very lonely journey. My inability to learn to breastfeed properly due to my birth injury meant that our breastfeeding journey was cut short. My daughter was always hungry and unsettled and as a result never slept well. She failed to gain weight which in turn caused more stress and anxiety for us as new parents. I had postnatal depression and anxiety. For a number of years I found it very hard to bond with my daughter. Processing her birth took up a lot of my mental energy and I don't think being separated early on helped with that either. I found myself wanting to be away from her and returned to work after just a few months. My daughter is now almost 8 and I feel like we have finally properly bonded in the last 1-2 years. It has taken me 6 years to get to a point where I feel close to my daughter.

I have had 2 more babies since my first. My second baby was born in 2017, 20 months after my first. I felt like I needed to have my second baby quite quickly in order to move past my first birth and to heal. With my second birth, I was under the care of the MGP program and I cannot stress enough how much this needs to be the standard of care that is made available to all women. Having a known midwife was so important and made such a huge difference to our experience. Thankfully; my second birth was beautiful and helped us to start on the journey of healing.

My third baby, _____ was born during Covid at the start of 2022. While his birth was an overall positive experience I would like to briefly comment on how harmful policies around visitation and Covid were. At the time of _____ birth, if my husband or I tested positive for Covid I was not allowed to have a support person in the room with me during his birth. This was an absolutely abhorrent policy that was not in any way patient centered. It caused stress and anxiety at the end of pregnancy, at a time where we should have been preparing to welcome a new baby. It meant that I isolated myself from other sources of support like my parents in fear that we would catch Covid. It meant I did not send my other 2 kids to school for the same reason. I was 40 weeks pregnant with 2 other children at home with zero access to support due to fear around catching Covid and therefore not being able to have the father of my baby present at his own child's birth. I was frequently in tears and losing sleep. I had to finish work early to reduce the risk of catching Covid which impacted our financial position. At this time people could go to the pub or sit in a crowd at the cricket but there was every chance I couldn't have my husband with me to support me during birth. The people who were responsible for these policies should be absolutely ashamed of themselves and I hope we never see anything like that in the hospital system again.

I hope that this submission helps to facilitate change within our hospital system. Too many families are being left to pick up the pieces after birth trauma. Birth should be cherished and respected and families should be going home feeling supported, not completely traumatized by a system that should do better.