

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

I birthed my daughter at _____ hospital, NSW, in September 2021. I experience bullying, coercion and obstetric violence with an episiotomy without my consent. I still suffer PTSD today and feel so much anger and sadness. Here is what I wrote at 3 months post partum to express my experience.

Whenever I'm alone I find these intrusive thoughts creeping in. Flashbacks. Vague and cloudy memories of the day I became a mother. Although I had always wished and longed for the day, I find the reminiscing haunting and I feel a heavy lump in my throat. My stomach turns and I feel sick. How can such a beautiful moment in my life make me so sad and full of too many emotions for my mind to begin comprehend?

I knew what I wanted and what my body was capable of. I thought I could stand my ground. I tried. I really did. But I felt as though there was no ground when I looked down, and I was alone.

"If you refuse this, you will be putting your baby's life in danger", "I will have to arrange for you to meet with the head of obstetrics. She won't speak to you on the phone, you have to see her in person", "I'll find out if your husband can come but due to covid restrictions he may not be able to", "I know you said you don't want to, but I'll book you in for the induction anyway... just in case you change your mind"

I was alone, afraid, and frightened of what my decisions would do. It wasn't about me anymore, it was about her - my sweet baby that I waited so long for. How could I refuse all the things I'd hoped not to happen when I was told if I did, I would be risking her life?

OK. I'll do it.

No need for a doctor to see you now, no risk in forcing the body into something it's supposed to do naturally, right?

Just turn up on the day. Your husband will be refused entry at the door. You'll be in a room alone with the midwife for over an hour, "sorry it's just covid rules"

Baby's heart rate is too high, wonder why? Are you anxious? Maybe you just need to empty your bladder. Your husband knows you're ok. (Am I ok?)

Ok, first part is done. Good luck. You can have your husband with you now. Go to the ward and wait. And wait. And wait. And walk. And walk. And walk. Up and down the stairs. (Maybe I can still go into labour naturally....) you can't leave the hospital or go outside. Covid rules.

Time for step 2, it shouldn't be too hard.

Oh but it was.

First time - failed.

Second time - sorry again, I'll get someone else to try.

Third time - not so lucky. "You're so brave".

Each attempt meant a speculum being cranked open inside of me - something I'd never experienced before. Each click tormenting me with the pain that would follow. Then an attempt to put the balloon in while my body screamed no but my mouth felt stitched shut.

Fourth - "we can stop at any time, just let us know... but we are going to have to try again"

But can I stop? What else can I do? Risk my baby's life? Go home and wait for natural labour like I had wanted, what I still want?

So keep going until you force something where it shouldn't go. 5th time, 5th doctor, and other eyes "for a learning experience" ... lucky them. Ok, it's in. Now just wait for 20 minutes and we will make sure the baby is ok. "You might get pain and bleeding from the trauma, I'll write you up some pain relief". Because that will fix what I've just been through?

Are these contractions? I'm so uncomfortable, I'm so alone. I can't sleep. Is it morning yet? Why can't I feel her moving? Why am I bleeding so much? Why didn't I pack more pairs of pants? Why did I agree to this? I wish my husband was here. I wish my Mum was here. I wish I was stronger to say no to this.

Finally, it's morning. The day my baby will be here. A silver lining. Just hold onto that.

"The labour ward is full, and after how long it took to get the balloon in last night we decided you aren't ready but we will let you know what's happening as soon as we know"

Waiting again, walking again. Up and down the stairs. I'm so tired, I'll just close my eyes for a minute.

Now the pain has stopped, I'm so disheartened. I thought for sure I'd be having my baby today.

Handover time. Maybe I'll find out what's going on.

"No pains, waiting to find out what's going on in labour ward. Independent. Not a lot happening. Doing well".

Crying, lots of it until it slowly turns into sobs. Why am I here? What was the point? Why can I hear babies crying but not my own?

The in charge midwife stared at me with concern. "What do you mean the balloon is still in? They should've taken that out this morning. Hold on, I'll find out what's happening"

Doctors, my midwife, the student midwife...

"We will review you tomorrow and make a plan"

Another night alone. I cried and slept and cried. I listened to the symphony of newborn babies cry with their tired mothers pacing the wards, longing to be there myself.

Morning, finally.

"Failed induction. Go home and come back tomorrow. We can try it all again"

And we did

NOTE:

"My birth wishes - because I was told I wasn't allowed to make a birth plan (it'd just set me up for failure, of course) : natural labour, labour at home for as long as possible, minimal intervention, my (2) support people with me, I would love a water birth, pain relief only when needed - I'm scared of an epidural due to previous trauma so I really don't want one. I don't want an episiotomy or any of that unless absolutely necessary"

- Monday.

Sam. Alone. In and out of hospital for 5 days.

“You can come to birth suite now and we will take out the balloon and check you over”

Still not favourable.

“Do you want to go home and come back and try again on Wednesday? Or we can book you in for a cesarean which could be the better option.”

NO. Just do it. My body can and will do it. Just give me a chance. Please. But can we wait for my husband to arrive? He was told he can't come back until 7am. He's on his way now.

Water birth is too risky. You can go into the only room with the bath, you just can't use it.

Only one support person allowed, and he's so tired too.

You're dehydrated, sorry we just need to try the IV again...again...again.

If you don't have an epidural you'll end up with a C-section.

We are going to prep you anyway, just in case.

No food. No drink. Just in case.

Give more pain relief. More. More.

Blocked right up to the armpits. Can't feel a thing “oh that's good”. Is it?

Time to push.

“Im just going to give you a little cut, all done” - I didn't want this. Did I say yes? Did anyone even ask me?

One last chance to push before we use the vacuum. Sorry. You couldn't do it. Baby is in distress now.

So. Many. Doctors.

But she's here, and she's ok. So I will be too. I should just be grateful she's ok, right? I should be happy. “Look at that beautiful baby. Wasn't it all worth it for her?”

Of course it was and always will be. But I'm not OK. That was not OK. It never will be.

When I'm alone. When I close my eyes to sleep. When I hear a certain sound, wear a certain t-shirt, reach a certain date each month, a milestone each week. A song I don't even know why. When I drive past the hospital. When I hear another woman's birth experience. When I see photos or videos of birth. When I'm overtired and fragile. When I look at my baby for too long. The intrusive thoughts creep in again. The flashbacks and scrambled memories of the day she was born.

There's more too, it's just too foggy to put into words. So many things, so wrong. I feel violated. Like an innocence was ripped from me. A dream I thought would become reality, turned into a living nightmare.

I wish I could forget, and that may just be the saddest part of it all. A moment and experience I had dreamed of since being aware of birth - gone.

I'm not OK. None of that was OK. It never will be.