

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

My name is . I'm a 45 year old married mum of two living in the area. I am writing to share my experience of birth trauma with the committee. I'll start by saying my submission contains very graphic and personal details. I apologise to those who read this and are impacted negatively by it. I hope you are well supported throughout this process.

I birthed both my children in Hospital - the first in 1999 when I was 21 and the second in 2002 when I was 24. My submission relates to the birth of my first child in 1999.

I went into natural labour at 42 weeks. The labour went for around 12 hours and I refused all pain relief. I was young, a hippie with "earth mother" ideals and wanted everything to be as natural as possible. Unfortunately, because I was at 42 weeks, my baby was big; 4.5kg as it turned out. He went into distress after about 11 hours of labour. He was stuck and I couldn't push him out, so the doctor was brought in and my baby had to be vacuum extracted. This resulted in some internal tearing of the wall between my vagina and rectum. I experienced significant blood loss. My husband told me afterwards the hospital room floor was a sea of my blood. The doctor said I needed to be stitched up to curb the blood loss. He proceeded to get the necessary equipment out, including some clamps that I imagine were intended to hold my labia apart so he could access the internal area properly. Unfortunately, he'd clamped the hood of my clitoris with the rest of the labia. I screamed in pain and confusion, and started to crawl on my back, up the bed to get away from the doctor. He got obviously angry with me at this point and grabbed the clamps, pressing down and pulling hard on them and commanding me to move back down towards him. I felt a searing pain which I now know was my clitoral hood being torn off my clitoris by the clamps. Keeping in mind I'd had no pain relief at all - I was hysterical with the pain. One of my last memories of this moment is of the doctor telling the other medical staff he needed to put me under to stitch me up. I was given a general anaesthetic and he stitched me up, but he obviously hadn't realised what damage he'd caused to my clitoral hood, because there was no stitching there. I had to have 2 blood transfusions following the birth.

Many weeks after the birth, I very gingerly inspected my labia and clitoris because I knew something wasn't right. It was then I saw the damage. I was mortified. I booked an appointment with my male GP who I had seen throughout my pregnancy. I was incredibly shy, embarrassed and felt ashamed about asking him to check out the damage. I'd grown up in a religious household where we didn't talk about sex or birth or body parts (sinful stuff), so I was not equipped to deal with this situation at all. I could barely even use the word clitoris in my GP's presence. He was clearly uncomfortable with it also. He had a quick look, said he couldn't see anything and that was it. I was too traumatised, naive and ashamed to push for him to assess the area properly.

I had no-one else to turn to for help and figured if my GP couldn't help, no-one else would be able to either. I didn't want to have to ask anyone else to look at me "down there" and I couldn't bring myself to talk about it to anyone else. I also couldn't believe a doctor in a hospital could be capable of such brutality on a young, vulnerable person. It just seemed so far from what I understood a doctor should be like, I convinced myself no-one would believe me if I ever did find the courage to speak up about it.

So I pushed it all to the back of my mind and just tried to get on with my life. I sought no counselling because I didn't know how to talk about it to anyone without feeling embarrassed and ashamed. I was diagnosed with clinical depression in the years following.

The damage is clearly visible to this day, 24 years later. My clitoral hood is not attached to my clitoris and I experience extreme sensitivity in the area, sometimes to the point of pain if accidentally brushed against and during some sexual activity. Before getting remarried and having a trusting relationship with my husband, I was extremely uncomfortable about being intimate with anyone in case they saw the damage and asked me about it.

This is the first time I have ever shared this story in full with anyone, even my husband of 10 years. I can write about it now, but I would still struggle to verbalise it. I'd need more information about the process for giving evidence at a hearing before I could make a decision about whether I'd be ok to do that. At this point I am open to the idea, if my story will somehow contribute to making the experience of birth a positive one for others.