

**Submission
No 70**

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Mrs Bronwyn Ford

Date Received: 21 July 2023

My name is Bronwyn Ford,

I suffered physical birth trauma during the birth of my daughter nearly 28 years ago, however this injury remained undiagnosed until 17 years after her birth by which time I had severe and debilitating symptoms of Pelvic Organ Prolapse. It has and continues to have a major impact on every aspect of my life, physically, emotionally and financially.

At the age of 32, when giving birth to my daughter who weighed 4080 grams/9lbs, I required a forceps rotation assisted delivery after labouring for 24 hours. 2 & 1/2 years later I gave birth to my larger son, it was a relatively quick birth in comparison however I required a surgical repair of a second degree tear. 12 months after his birth I required major abdominal surgery for severe abdominal muscle separation and an umbilical hernia. At no time during this postpartum period and in the years following, was my pelvic health ever assessed even though I ticked many of the risk factors for the development of Pelvic Organ Prolapse. I was never made aware that I was at higher risk, never advised of what Prolapse was and what symptoms to be aware of.

As the years progressed I looked after my family, becoming an active member of my children's P&C Committee at their primary school and returned to paid work on a part time basis. Unfortunately symptoms started to impact my ability to carry out these activities effectively. By the time my children had reached high school my symptoms were debilitating and affecting so many aspects of my life. I was also Perimenopausal and suffering from it's associated symptoms. It was at this stage that my pelvic health was finally assessed and a diagnosis was given complete bilateral Levator Ani Avulsion injuries (pelvic floor muscles torn from the pubic bone) along with 3rd to 4th degree prolapses of my bladder, uterus and rectum.

“Levator Ani Muscle avulsion is a condition associated with vaginal delivery. It is often not identified at the time of injury but confers **lifelong morbidity**”.

[A review of levator ani avulsion after childbirth: incidence, diagnosis and management, by Elizabeth Doxford-Hook a, Candice Downey b, Joanna Gibson a, Fiona Marsh c, published in December 2022.]

“Levator avulsion incidence rates after caesarean, spontaneous, vacuum and **forceps** deliveries were 1, 15, 21 and **52%**, respectively.”

[Levator avulsion: a Systematic evidence review published in March 2022]

The association between forceps delivery and injuries sustained is clear.

The consequences of the injuries my body sustained during childbirth and the subsequent development of severe prolapses has affected so many aspects of my life.

Physically:

My ability to carry out everyday activities including difficulty with bladder and bowel movements. Repeated back pain limiting my ability to carry out household chores, grocery shopping, washing, vacuuming etc. An impact on intimacy. A heaviness and dragging sensation in my pelvic floor only relieved by lying down. The list goes on!

Financially:

Not being able to continue with my paid work due to its requirements of heavy lifting and standing for long periods of time. The cost of Dr's visits, specialist appointments, diagnostic tests, physiotherapy appointments, surgery costs and so on. \$\$\$\$\$\$!

Emotionally:

Not understanding what was happening with my body and being in constant discomfort and pain. Thinking that I was the only one going through this and not being able to talk about it openly due to the social taboos with talking about vaginal and intimate health issues.

In 2012 I underwent invasive surgery, this entailed a vaginal hysterectomy, a repair to my front vaginal wall with mesh, a repair to my back vaginal wall, my vaginal vault sutured to my sacrospinous ligaments with mesh and my enlarged vaginal opening reduced. It was a long and painful recovery. Unfortunately my complete bilateral Avulsion injuries could not be repaired as currently there is no mainstream surgical repair for this injury, so the injury remains. Since then I have been under the care of various Pelvic Health Physiotherapists, I'm now up to my 5th practitioner. These wonderful physiotherapists were and still are, instrumental in helping me regain a functional pelvic floor and assist me with gaining and maintaining strength and endurance.

Without a functional pelvic floor, urinary and fecal continence becomes a major issue. I will remain under the care of a Physiotherapist for the rest of my life to ensure that the strength and function I have achieved is maintained, however the chance of regaining full function and strength is not certain due to my injuries and the aging process.

My physiotherapist also assists with monitoring my transvaginal mesh looking for any evidence of erosion or complications as the years progress. Unfortunately the mesh that was used in my surgery has been banned from use in Australia and is part of a class action. This contributes to the emotional aspect of my recovery process. Do I have a ticking time bomb waiting to go off? What will be the long term consequences of having mesh? My abdominal surgery also included extensive use of mesh and I was left with nerve damage and a lack of sensation across my entire abdominal region. I have also experienced surgery and treatment for breast cancer and Rheumatoid Arthritis, an autoimmune disease. Is there a correlation between the use of mesh and these health conditions? Nobody knows.

I have been in a privileged position where I have been able to afford private health insurance and was able to have my surgery at a private hospital with my choice of surgeon. I have also been able to financially access physiotherapists, however, all of this still entails significant out of pocket expenses. When living on a single wage it is challenging to give yourself permission to prioritise your health and the costs incurred in doing so.

As a member of multiple patient led and created support groups for women living with birth trauma and Pelvic Organ Prolapse, I have an in depth understanding of the impact that this trauma has on so many women, women that are newly postpartum or like myself, decades after the trauma occurred, and women at every life stage.

I am willing to have my submission published with my name and I am willing to be a witness.