

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
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I have had three births, two of which ended in an 'early birth' (miscarriage) and one full term birth that resulted in the arrival of my 2.5 year old son.

I am one of four children. At age eleven, I watched my mum birth my sister, my parents third child, in front of the fireplace in the home that they had built in the planned homebirth with my grandmother and their private midwife also present. It was a fast, powerful birth and incredible introduction to what birth can look like. It left a very strong impression on me as a young woman, entering puberty, knowing and hoping that one day, I too, would give birth. And that it could look as normal and healthy and safe as the birth of my sister.

After falling pregnant, my husband and I reached out to the homebirth system that is available for free through our local hospital.

I should probably begin this part of the story by saying that I think that this service is incredibly important for our community. Women having access to free birth at home is so important, and I think that women should be able to birth however and wherever they want, with the kind of support that they need, for free. What I don't agree with is the pressure on interventions that is so ingrained into even the home-birthing model of care that we received. I really think of the interventions that we received, namely, vaginal checks and the forced beginning of labour, as being where the downward sort of spiral that led me away from the kind of birth that I wanted began.

About three months later, we would come to realise that this pregnancy would not reach full term as we had experienced what is sometimes called a chemical pregnancy. The care ended with the Midwife immediately, and I would spend the next two months bleeding and healing before feeling ready to try to conceive again.

About four months after we had miscarried, we conceived my son. Again, we reached out to that same free home-birthing program through the hospital. The care throughout the pregnancy really emphasised a lot of the pressure, expectation and assumptions upheld by the system to which midwives are responsible. That was an incredible amount of pressure on me, throughout the pregnancy around birthing within a certain time frame. It was stressed again and again throughout the pregnancy to the extent that I spent the last month and a half of the pregnancy trying to bring the baby on with extensive acupuncture, exercise, herbal remedies etc. I was exhausted by the time labour had begun because I was told to work so hard to start labour. A midwife who came to do a home visit, who was not my usual midwife, told me at 37 weeks, because of my small frame, I should try to bring my son on from here on out. She told me that my baby was posterior, as myself and my three siblings had been, and that if I didn't flip the baby around, birth would be extremely painful.

After many stressful weeks, trying to bring birth on, on the second last day before my birth plan would have to be shifted to birth at the hospital because of how pregnant I was (two

days short of forty-two weeks) the midwife arrived at our house to do a stretch and sweep. I had expressed throughout the pregnancy that I was very anti-intervention and wanted to have as natural a pregnancy and birth as possible. I was 23, incredibly healthy, and had a very vibrant and vital pregnancy, and a very positive attitude towards birthing. I had a very deep trust of birth and my body is capacity to birth naturally and safely.

The stretch and sweep was performed in the morning, and by early in the evening contractions had well and truly begun. My Doula and a midwife arrived late in the night, at maybe 10 or 11 o'clock, and found me in our candlelit home, on all fours with my husband, in what can really only be described in un-medical terms as a purely ecstatic state, very freely roaring my baby down into my pelvis with a very liberated energy. This went on for hours, and I was well and truly very deep in active labour. I would move between the bed we had set up with waterproof towels, and a hot shower, and the toilet, and a big, exercise ball, all while my husband and Doula took turns squeezing, my hips and letting me be. Their support was gentle and natural and birth was feeling incredibly strong and obviously painful but I was in a very good place with it.

My husband asked whether I wanted the birth pool to be filled up, and whatever facial expression I managed to give him suggested that it was time to do so. As the pool was almost ready, the midwife appeared for what felt like the first time and said that she had to do a routine vaginal examination. At this point, my waters had already broken, my contractions were incredibly strong, and very very close together, almost without break, and I felt sure that if I was to hop in the pool, I would be able to begin pushing soon. After the unwanted, but insisted-up vaginal examination with my midwives large fingers, bringing back the trauma of the stretch and sweep, I was told that I was only 4cm dilated. This was absolutely crushing, shattering news, and I immediately heaved and shook uncontrollably. I could immediately feel myself shut down as her fingers entered my unwilling body for the examination. She was, in a way, I'm doing the energy of birth and my body closed-off to it. The powerful, natural atmosphere of the birth was replaced with a daunting fear that I wasn't birthing in the way that I should be, and then I couldn't carry on and bring the energy back to birth my son. There was a very obvious, palpable shift in the room, and from that point on I couldn't get back into that energy that I had been labouring with overnight and through to the morning.

Recognising this, my Doula and husband worked really hard and lovingly to gently encourage that energy back into the space, but I was so defeated and crushed now, overcome with exhaustion, that it just didn't feel possible. After some hours of this, the midwife suggested that we all have a sleep, and while my doula and husband slept, I continued to experience contractions by myself. After everyone had had a rest, my husband and doula began working hard at getting the energy moving again. I was upright again, and slowly walking around outside the fire with my husband. I remember the birdsong and the sunlight feeling more beautiful than ever. We went inside, and as suggested by my Doula, stood bent over the kitchen bench, while swinging my hips, and having either her, or my husband, push really hard into my hips to relieve the pain from having a posterior baby.

Before I knew it, it was late in the afternoon, and the midwife said that if I couldn't get the energy moving again, we would have to transfer to hospital because something might be wrong. The second Midwife came soon after to replace our primary Midwife as she had almost been there for as long as she was legally allowed to be. When that second Midwife got there, they both agreed that sterile water injections might be the best and most natural way to give me enough relief from the pain and exhaustion to have a window to really dilate and get back into the energy of birth.

They were worried that I wasn't progressing at the rate that I needed to and suggested that I needed to go to the hospital. It didn't feel like they were really any other options, so that is what we did.

The hospital is an absolute disgrace of a blur of the worst possible treatment and trauma I could imagine well experiencing during what should have been the most beautiful initiations of my life. Without ever really being told what the complication or worrisome situation was, the birth was treated like an absolute state of emergency. When denying certain interventions, the head doctor at hospital told me I was risking the life of my son. He would roll his eyes at me and mutter things like 'typical' or 'you're one of those' and 'oh and who's the doctor here?' under his breath. It was like I was a child being punished by the school principal for speaking out of line. I felt foolish and childlike in his presence. I was being monitored on a screen, along with my baby, and there was nothing particularly the matter other than the fact that I was exhausted.

In the space of being there, I had two separate midwives tend to me, countless nurses, and too many student, midwives, doctors, and nurses enter the room, unannounced and unwonted. At one point, I yelled across the room that no one was to enter my birth space unannounced. That no one with clipboards was allowed to come and poke and prod me. I was furious that I had to speak up for myself in this way, and at this time.

The obstetrician went to great lengths to press interventions upon me. There was no intervention that wasn't suggested. He, along with the midwives, performed, God knows how many vaginal examinations. I have a very clear and distinct memory of telling the obstetrician not to touch my vagina, telling him that I did not want his hands inside me, and asking whether there was someone else you might be able to do it if it was so absolutely necessary. He told me that he was the best in the business, and that if I cared for my son, I would let him do the examination. Everything was framed in this way, where it was either I had to trust his medical expertise over my own instinct, or I was putting my son at harm. I was exhausted and so truly defeated, which was strongly worsened by the way that I was treated by all of the doctors, midwives and nurses who stepped into that room. From the moment that the ambulance was called until my son was born, things seemed to get worse and worse, and seemed to move so much further away from the kind of birth that I had envisioned then I could have ever thought possible.

When my husband left my side for the first time since labour had begun to go and have a breath of fresh air to re-centre himself outside, the obstetrician came in, and without telling me why, said that if I didn't sign the waiver for him to perform a c-section, I was putting my son's life willingly and unnecessarily at risk. He kept pressing on the emphasis of this, saying that I wasn't progressing at the rate that I needed to, that Caesarean was the only way to get him out. Through tears, completely distraught, I kept asking for him to wait until my husband was back so that we could talk about it. At this point, as well, it is worth noting that the only pain relief I had had was that whistle thing that they offer in the ambulance. I was exhausted and defeated, but hadn't given up entirely. It was about 11:30 at this point. When my husband came back very shortly after he left, the obstetrician told him that he discussed with me that we really needed to make a decision on whether or not we would agree to having a Caesarean. Eventually we agreed to it because we thought it was our only option.

Our doula spent a brief moment, while the obstetrician went to go and prepare the room and the medical team, asking us what our wishes were for this Caesarean and anything that we wanted to have passed on to the team. We said that we did not want our son bathed, or taken away from us, or to have his umbilical cord cut, along with several other things. She wrote this down, handed it to the Midwife to read over, and then handed it to the obstetrician when he came back into the room, and explained that it was a legally binding request and that these are wishes.

Because of the apparent severity of the (non-existent) emergency, this c-section was prepared very quickly and in a completely wild rush of time, my son was born and squealing and pink and beautiful and on my chest. He was wiped down while laying on my neck, and had his cord cut.

There are so many details of horrific, terrifying and unnecessary language, and abuse, and lack of kindness, and lack of trust, and pressing of intervention that I do not have the time to list in between all of these major events, also things that have taken me a long time to process and heal. The treatment and progression of things was so entirely unnecessary that my heart hasn't stopped breaking over this fact. The obstetrician said, when my son came out, that he had the cord around his neck too many times to ever have been born vaginally, and that my frame was simply too small to ever be able to give birth naturally. Neither of the two are true. I so deeply resent this man, the system that trained him and that he is responsible to, and everything that I was robbed of from this experience.

My son did not need to be born into a bright room full of strangers. He should have been birthed at home, into the arms of me, and my husband, with a healthy, familiar, mitochondrial environment, attached to his placenta, free to arrive at the time, and on the day that he wanted to, in the position that he safely needed to. I was so riddled with guilt after this experience that, for sometime, I told myself that we were saved by the system. I was told that if I ever wanted to birth again, I had better book myself in for a Caesarean if I wanted a healthy living baby. I, like them, had believed that I was broken. That my body didn't know how to birth. That trusting my instincts was not enough. 2 1/2 years later, and my husband and I are

getting ready to conceive our second child, after recently having experienced a second 'early birth' (miscarriage). There is so much more I wish I had the time to say, and this is not a story that I have shared many times because it is riddled with shame and fury and hurt, and so much of it has been buried and forgotten, but in submitting this, I reclaim my full power. There needs to be change. The birthing system must undergo serious study and research. One thing I have learned since giving birth those 2 1/2 years ago is that my story is a very, very common story for first-time mothers. The abuse of power and mistrust and doubt in birth and birthing bodies must change. I am still furious that I was treated this way and left so little choice, explanation, and trust.

In preparing for the pregnancy and birth of our second child, the main thing I want to leave my story with is that we will choose an incredibly different model of care for the next birth. I will not be subject to the training and system of a model of care that essentially feels like it couldn't care less for the well-being of women. I will not choose this outdated, patriarchal, moneymaking, time-conscious model. And again, I wish I had more time to go into more depth, but being mother is busy work, and my son is waking. Please change the future by changing birth. I beg of you. I will tell my story again and again and speak to this in more depth, if it can be of any service to radical change in the birth system.