

Submission
No 131

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

My name is _____ and I am a mother to two children, aged 6 and 3. During my first pregnancy, I really wanted to experience continuity of care, as a sexual abuse survivor entering the maternity system for the first time. I was not accepted in my local midwifery group practice program, and thus began my fragmented care by various GP's and a different midwife at each appointment, and an unknown midwife at my birth.

Despite being considered low risk, at my final hospital antenatal appointment at 40 weeks gestation, an obstetrician who I had never met before, told me he was booking me in for an induction of labour. When I declined this, knowing it was an evidence based choice to wait until spontaneous onset of labour, he told me I had "8 days to fix the problem." This created a lot of anxiety for me, feeling the pressure to have an induction when I didn't want to. I felt pressure to have stretch and sweep inductions, which as an abuse survivor felt violating and I dissociated from the pain and bleeding.

At 41 weeks gestation, I visited the antenatal clinic to have CTG monitoring, as advised. A midwife on staff that day told me "do you want to leave this hospital with an alive baby, or a dead baby?" and that I better book in for an induction soon.

A registrar came to see me as I was crying at the above comments. She said "it was likely I would have a caesarean anyway" (due to my above average BMI) and "I might as well book in for an induction to get the process started."

I felt completely disrespected and unseen as a powerful pregnant woman. It didn't feel like anyone believed in me or my ability to birth my baby. I didn't feel like I had agency or choice.

On the day I went in for an induction (after feeling coerced into the decision from fear mongering and the dead baby card thrown at me), I was disheartened and upset. The opposite emotions I wanted to be experiencing as my labour began.

While my midwives were both fantastic (I had two over a 24 hour period), there was one obstetrician who was awful to me. She wanted to hurry me along, continually threatened that I needed to have a caesarean because the CTG machine was not working and my baby was 42 weeks gestation. She didn't address me by name or speak to me with respect. She told me my baby was going to need surgical assistance to be born vaginally, and went through the pros and cons of ventouse and forceps delivery.

When she left to attend a caesarean birth, I pushed my baby out vaginally, without assistance. I remember pushing with full force and determination, to ensure that my baby was born when she was not in the room, that's how unsafe and uncomfortable I felt with her there.

After the birth, she returned with disbelief that I had done it. I am not sure if she was trying to unconsciously punish me, however when she was suturing my perineal tear, she spoke to a student doctor next to me - not addressing me - and said "women are never told that their vaginas will never be the same again, as you can see here."

I felt like I was a piece of meat being worked on.

5 hours after my birth, I experienced a postpartum hemorrhage. While the staff responded to this medical emergency promptly and efficiently, the response included my uterus being roughly palpated to remove blood clots, someone inserted their hand into my vagina, and medication was inserted into my anus. I remember leaving my body and floating above it, thinking that I would die and my baby would be left motherless, while also being numb to the experience. It was deeply distressing for someone who experienced previous sexual abuse, to

be held down on the hospital bed by multiple people, while hands and fingers were put inside of my body.

I experienced flash backs and nightmares for months after, and it impacted my anxiety levels as a new mother - I often thought that myself or my baby was going to die in that first year of motherhood.

I believe the PPH I experienced was directly related to the intervention in my birth and could have been avoided, had the hospital staff not pushed induction. Using synthetic oxytocin is known to be an increased risk for PPH. This, coupled with an environment where I did not feel safe, where I was disrespected, increased my anxiety and my body responded by bleeding heavily.

I went on to have twice-weekly to weekly therapy for 3 years following this experience. When I became pregnant for the second time, I immediately hired a private midwife and birthed a healthy baby at home at 42 weeks gestation, without any complications and no PPH. It was one of the most incredible experiences of my life and I felt so powerful and connected to my strength as a woman and a mother. My baby was born safely in peace, and I only have positive feelings about the experience of being cared for by the same midwife from pregnancy to postpartum.

The same can not be said for my first pregnancy and birth - and every year that my daughter turns a year older, I reflect on my traumatic entry to motherhood.

I will never forget what was said and done to me. It is almost 7 years since I experienced birth trauma and it is as clear in my mind as the day.