

Submission
No 267

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

My name is _____, I live in the _____ Sydney area with my Husband and 4yr old son. I am a Clinical Nurse Educator working within cancer services at _____ Hospital. I'd like to bring attention to how the interactions in my antenatal care impacted me, as well as the clinical decisions relating to induction of labour impacted me.

4 years ago, 9th April 2019, I gave birth to my son at _____ Hospital, Sydney. He's the best thing to ever happen to me, in the worst way. There are many compounding factors, which led to my birth experience being traumatic, not just physically, but also psychologically. I especially want to highlight the knock on effect it had both in my immediate postpartum period all the way to now, 4 years later.

I was referred to the mother and babies clinic _____ by my GP. There was no discussion about options; I was not informed about options for midwifery group practice or the opportunity to have continuity of care (which we know is the gold standard of care). During this period I felt very lost, I felt like I just needed to do what I was told and was given very little information along the way. My visits to _____ clinic were extremely stressful for me; it is a huge clinic with a huge workload. Midwives are understandably very busy. I felt like a number. There wasn't much warmth from the midwives. You take a number and then you wait four hours some days more. For every visit I would have to call work and call in sick for the rest of the day.

I want to make it very clear that I am not in any way ungrateful for the care I received, but rather point out limitations within the service and how this is impacting pregnant women and the care they receive.

I went in for a routine visit one day, the midwife (MW) came across a little abrupt and seemed rather cold. I was asked if I had completed my blood tests prior – to which I responded yes I did at _____ hospital. I stated my results would be visible on electronic medical record, since _____ and _____ are both in the same district. She was not impressed and asked me again if I had done them, as she could not see the results. I felt she was irritated and like I was wasting her time. Moments later she apologized and said "oh I found them here". What she didn't know was I could see she was actually looking at the wrong patients record. She then proceeded to ask me if I had a referral to which I responded yes I do, It's here somewhere. She then replied in a condescending tone "well you can't have the scan if you don't have the referral". She then moved to taking my blood pressure and well, it was elevated. Concerned she retook it a few times. I have to point out, I cannot fault the clinical care. The concerns were escalated quickly. However, the irony is, my elevated blood pressure was a direct result of the previous interactions I had just had with her. I then was required to stay for monitoring, extra blood tests/diagnostics, and fetal monitoring. 8.5 hrs later a very apologetic doctor came to tell me all was good and my blood pressure had returned to normal. She then asked me this question "did anything upset you today?", I replied no, unaware at the time that stress had been inflicted on me by the MW. I also got a parking ticket, as I wasn't able to leave and move my car. This is a small example, but a common theme over the duration of my care. There were many interactions like this.

I was diagnosed with gestational diabetes at 29 weeks. I was immediately classified "high risk" and linked in with the diabetes clinic. My experience with the diabetes clinic was not so great. The dietary advice given to women is quite outdated, and in my experience, there is zero

consideration for history of eating disorders and no focus on the psychological wellbeing of the woman. As someone who has suffered from eating disorders in the past, the heavy focus on strict diet control, calorie counting and checking blood sugars 4 times per day proved very challenging. I felt like I had all the weight on my shoulders, and if I stuffed up, I compromise my baby's health.

One week I had an educator tell me I wasn't eating enough and my sugars were too low, the next week I had one tell me I had gained too much weight. The weight comment impacted me, I hadn't actually gained a large amount of weight and was well within the recommendations (on the lower side). She was going of my body surface area (BSA), my baseline BSA has always been on the high side even at my fittest and only being a size 8. BSA is not an effective measure of weight and has great limitations. I feel these comments can be so damaging to women, especially someone like myself who is sensitive to them. The way I ate, and my ability to control my sugars was a huge source of stress during my pregnancy.

The worst visit was when a diabetes nurse educator violated my privacy and demanded I show her my reading history on my glucometer because she didn't believe my written results. I felt really small, and like I was naughty girl not following the rules.

My sugars were well controlled with diet alone and from 37 weeks I was able to re attend the "low risk" clinic. I met the most warm and kind Midwife and I ended up seeing her twice in the lead up to my birth. During my last visit I was told I would need to be induced at 41 weeks due to having GD, despite my blood sugar still being well controlled. I was scared of an induction, I had a friend who had an awful experience, but was not entirely against it. I wasn't given any information at this point other than a basic outline of methods of induction. No risks, benefits or evidence for the recommendation was provided to me. I was told the induction would be discussed at my next visit in 7 days. In my mind I thought I had some time to digest this plan but also, to go into labor naturally.

The next day (on a Saturday) I received a call from a midwife at the birth suite stating my induction had been booked for the following Tuesday (in 3 days time). I expressed my reservation and stated I did not feel comfortable with that plan and that I was not expecting it, I didn't know what the safest thing to do. I was offered an appointment with the doctor Monday morning to discuss my options. Monday morning my waters broke at home. I went into hospital, but instead of having the discussion about induction, I was told if I didn't go into labour within 24 hrs I needed to start the induction at 8am the next day. I was not given any information, and options, any choice. I went home. Overnight I started having contractions (which I now know was early labour), I wish I had of known I could have stayed home, since labour had indeed started. I got to hospital, and my contractions disappeared completely. I was told I wasn't in labour and felt like I was silly for thinking I was. The induction was started (pitocin IV) around 830am. My contractions went from 0-10 real quick. This was not explained to me prior, I was at not time told I could request the rate be turned down. The contractions continued to escalate, shooting up my back. I remember arching up the bed and feeling like I was going to die, I wanted to die. The pain was out of this world, and from how I hear other women describe physiological contractions, not normal. I felt out of control and like I wasn't coping. I finally was offered gas hours later, I couldn't even inhale during a contraction the pain was so intense. I was offered water injections but was warned they would be more painful than the contractions. And they were. They worked for a little while. I eventually asked for an epidural and from then on I was able to have some relief. I progressed quickly despite this, and was told I was ready to push at 7pm. After pushing for 1.5hrs I was told I had made

little progress. I was assessed to see if I was pushing effectively and I was. It was at this point I was warned once I hit 2hrs of pushing, I would need assistance to get baby out. It was 8:45pm and I was told more people would enter the room in a moment, but not to panic. Being a nurse myself, I know more people in the room means more things could go wrong now. I began to cry, I was scared. The midwife was so lovely and kind, and the student midwife was so encouraging. I was assured baby was okay but I was aware his HR had dropped and taken a bit longer to recover (I now know this is a risk of induction). The obstetrician and junior doctor came in. I was told they would use the vacuum to help bring baby down (he was stuck), and then I could push him out myself. The junior doctor had trouble attaching the vacuum, the senior doctor was not impressed. My husband says the junior doctor pulled so hard he was leaning back with his entire body weight – yes the vacuum was attached to my son's head. I don't like to think of the damage that may have been done to my child. Cerebral palsy being one risk from instrumental delivery, again not a risk discussed with my when I gave my consent. My son was born, healthy and pink. He was placed on my chest. I was told not long after, I had an injury which needed to be repaired in theater. I was also haemorrhaging, and was being clinically managed. I was told I had 10 minutes with my son, and then he was taking away from me. I was wheeled to theater. I felt so alone, everyone around me in the theater was laughing and joking, talking about their weekends. There were discussions about bullying claims, and some very unprofessional conduct. All while I lay on a cold table shivering and shaking, in pain, uncomfortable and bare. While someone stitched up my perineal tear. The anesthetist administered more pain relief every time I flinched.

I was catheterized and weak. I couldn't move. Laying in my own blood with and icepack between my legs. I could not move. That night I could not even keep my eyes open, not even to stare at my beautiful new baby. The MW manually expressed my breast, I wasn't even able to feed my baby.

The days following were brutal – I had latching issues and my baby was very sleepy/jaundice and unable to feed properly (result of all the drugs given to me in labour and the huge haematoma on his head from the vacuum). He was very distressed feeding and was very stiff, didn't seem comfortable. He was forced on my by one MW who said "you can't hurt him", which I now know is not true – you should never force a babies head onto the breast. My nipples were damaged, cracked and bleeding and I was put on nipple rest and told to pump. I relied solely on the MWs to get the bottles of expressed milk and determine the volume to feed my son. One MW brought me a bottle for me to feed my son, I had him low on my lap as my partner had fallen asleep and I couldn't move up the bed or reposition myself due to my injury and pain, she said from the door way "are you going to hold him properly", I couldn't say anything. She didn't offer to help me. She then yelled from the nurse station once "that baby is not getting enough milk", as my son hadn't had a wet nappy in a while and was very sleepy. This broke me. I cried for hours. I never forgot what she said, and this was a huge source of anxiety for months I questioned whether I was feeding him

I was discharged home 5 days later, still unable to breastfeed but advised to use a pump. My breastfeeding journey was hell. I was triple feeding, trying to breastfeed, pumping and then bottle-feeding. I would get 30 minutes sleep at a time. I attended every clinic, paid \$1000s on breast pumps, lactation consultants. I weaned at 11 months, my wellbeing took a massive hit.

I was diagnosed with PTSD at 6 months. I had postnatal depression and anxiety. I feel like my experience stole all the joy from what was supposed to be the most special time of our lives. Still to this day I remain in therapy. We have not been able to grow out family, even though we so desperately want to. I'm not sure I could go through that again. I still struggle today, it took years for me to feel connected with my son. This is extremely distressing, I grieve what I should have been able to feel everyday.

I think the reasons why this was so traumatic is that I never felt informed, I wasn't involved in decision making, I felt a real power dynamic and I was scared to question or go against advice. There was no medical reason for the induction to start when it did. The risks definitely outweighed the benefits, and that is not person centered and safe practice. Policy needs to change, there needs to be a more woman centered approach. Women need to be given a choice and care providers need the support to support them. Antenatal clinics and birth suites need to be better resourced and staffed so that woman aren't treated like a number, because it doesn't end when the birth ends. It lasts a lifetime.