

Submission  
No 276

## INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

**Name:** Name suppressed

**Date Received:** 15 August 2023

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Partially  
Confidential

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, I'm 38 and live in \_\_\_\_\_ with my 3yr old and 1yr old.

I had both my births at \_\_\_\_\_ Hospital. One was deeply disappointing and negative, while the other was largely empowering and positive. Both had lasting effects. I'd like to share some defining factors in each.

AUGUST 2020

In summary:

- I felt forced into an induction
- I was not given accurate information regarding GBS management
- I was not told my baby was posterior for the whole labour
- I was made to feel like an inconvenience
- "Failure"
- I was not looked after in maternity
- After birth effects

Overall I felt a real lack of care, warmth, respect, and openness. I felt that I was coerced into things that did not need to happen, and may well have worked out better if I'd not gone through with them. I felt not listened to and not supported as a birthing mother, and I feel myself and my family both suffered the effects of that. And the thing is, I had done my research. I was educated about birth. I am articulate and feel comfortable expressing myself. I am a white, cis-gendered woman. So I cannot imagine what it could be like for someone without those (unfair) advantages.

I felt forced into an induction.

Upon arrival at the hospital, I was told I'd need an induction as any other option was going to be detrimental. Although I felt educated about my options (due to some excellent birth prep from an independent provider), the staff were insistent that induction was the only way forward. I questioned, was shut down repeatedly, and was told this was the only safe option. Since debriefing this birth several months later with a clinical midwife, I was assured that given my circumstances, an induction was not needed at that point.

I was not given accurate information regarding GBS management.

Prior to going into labour, I knew that having GBS would mean needing some treatment at the hospital. However, once my waters broke at home and I called to inform the birth unit, they were adamant that there was only one option: come in immediately, be hooked up to antibiotics for the duration of labour, and get an induction immediately (as described above). I was made to feel that my baby was in grave danger if I did not consent to this. I've since learnt that this isn't true, and this was a different experience in my second birth (see below).

I was not told my baby was posterior for the whole labour.

Although I later found out that my baby had been posterior since I arrived at hospital, I was never told this. I'd done my research, and if I had known this it would have helped me greatly in managing labour (in terms of positioning etc). Instead, I was told to try the birthing stool then spend a lot of time on my back (both not recommended for posterior babies). I was struggling so much with back pain, and feeling like something was seriously wrong with me. If somebody had communicated that the baby was posterior, it would have helped my mindset a huge deal.

I was made to feel like an inconvenience.

When I had been labouring several hours, was fatigued and loud, trying my best, and feeling a strong urge to push, I was told that I needed to calm down, not make so much noise, and not to push. I strongly wanted to move around and was told it was best to get on the bed. For any birthing woman in the midst of a hard labour, this is a ridiculous, belittling and impractical thing to say.

“Failure”

I was eventually given 2 epidurals, both of which failed (yes, really), then a form was shoved into my hands and I was told I had to sign my consent for a Caesarian (although thankfully I did not end up getting one). As if I was in sound mind to sign anything. It was then I checked out mentally. I was physically beyond what I felt I was capable of (although, again, if I knew baby was posterior that would've helped me significantly), and had been made to feel like I was being over the top and inconvenient. Being wheeled into the operating theatre and getting a spinal block was extremely distressing, and what was meant to be a defining, if difficult, moment in my life was turning into one where I was treated as a vessel rather than a human. It was not an emergency.

I was not looked after in maternity.

After spending time in recovery, I was eventually taken up to the maternity ward. Having not eaten for 21 hours, I asked for something to eat. The staff member sighed, said dinner had finished, and got me a cheese and crackers pack. Finally I was taken to see my baby in recovery for our first proper cuddle (before soon being asked to leave as I looked 'too tired'). Then back to maternity. Nobody offered to help me shower, get changed, get off to the bed to gather my things. I was in a huge amount of pain with several stitches. The next morning I was not given any breakfast, even after I told a staff member I hadn't been fed. Again nobody was around to help me do anything. I was briskly told to 'get up and go and look after my baby'. So I shuffled as best I could to the nursery, behind a staff member who did not offer any assistance. This lack of care and support continued for the 3 days I was in hospital. On leaving, I had to repeatedly ask if someone could please check my stitches and how I was healing, until finally a reluctant staff member did.

## After birth effects

I had post-natal depression. I believe this was partly due to my feelings of failure and trauma surrounding the birth and those tender first days.

JULY 2022

In summary:

- I had birth debrief from my first birth
- I received information regarding mental health support
- I was not micro-managed during labour
- I was taken care of after birth
- After birth affects

Overall I felt a sense of empowerment, confidence, positivity and support. Pre-labour, I was given compassionate, helpful, evidence-based guidance in the form of several birth debrief/prep sessions with a clinical midwife. I felt listened to and validated. This instilled a sense of realistic optimism even in the face of another GBS diagnosis and GD (very mild). During labour I was able to move and be as I wished. The staff were supportive and encouraging. And the tender care I received in those first moments after birth made me feel looked after as a mother, not just a baby carrier. All in all it was a healing experience for me, physically and mentally, and those positive hours and days were a much better launchpad for postpartum.

I had a birth debrief from my first birth.

This was the catalyst for change leading into - and during - my second birth. Early on during my second pregnancy, I was offered to see a clinical midwife who would debrief my first birth and discuss my upcoming one. It was flagged (or perhaps I was flagged) due to my emotional response when asked to recall any notable things from my previous birth at the hospital. I can't understate how valuable, insightful, validating and informative those sessions were. We went through the medical notes from my birth, discussed the developments from both the hospital's and my perspective, explained some approaches and lamented others. I was given the space to express my experience of birth, comforted in my discomfort and allowed to rage and painfully wonder about how it might have been different, thus changing my whole trajectory.

I received information regarding mental health support.

As I had challenging feelings about my first birth and had been seeing a psychologist regarding PND, I was quite anxious when I became pregnant again. My GP (with whom I did Shared Care) was proactive in making sure I was connected with services. Not all GPs would be so onto it. I was also put in contact with the hospital's social workers, who checked in on me too. Going in the second time aware of the services and options out there was really helpful, and

I think just trusting that my mental health would be supported made things so much easier. I didn't get PND again.

I was not micro-managed during labour.

From when I arrived in hospital, I was largely left to my own devices in terms of labouring how I wanted to. I wasn't hooked up to everything (which had been unnecessary the first time) and had total freedom of movement. I was encouraged to do what I needed to do. We'd informed them I wanted to proceed with no interventions or medications unless strictly necessary in the case of an emergency. They respected this. It was the most painful, intense thing I have ever experienced, yet it was still so positive, because I was supported and I was doing it the way I wanted to. It was like being trusted to birth in the way I wanted, further helped me believe in myself too.

I was taken care of after birth.

In the minutes after I birthed my baby (with the encouragement from supportive staff by my side), I felt so looked after. There was a new midwife with the shift changeover but even she immediately made me feel so cared for. Everything was explained to me. She let me know she was there to help me whenever I felt ready to get up. Nobody tried to take my baby away or rush me along (unlike last time). She gently helped me stand and hobble to the shower. She was kind and warm. This tone continued in the maternity ward with the staff there. Given how neglected and unsupported I felt in the first hours and days after my first birth, this change was huge.

After birth effects

My physical healing was immensely better the second time around. This is partly due to things outside of anybody's control. But I believe that part of it was because I was able to have an intervention-free birth. Being physically much less battered meant my healing was much quicker, which helped so much in post-partum. Combined with my feelings of pride and peace surround my birth experience, my mental health was far better the second time around.

IN CONCLUSION

I believe we need more of:

- Birth debriefing. I was not aware this was an available service before I received it, and have been singing its praises to every person who sounds like they could benefit (I.e. every mother).
- Mental health support before, during and after pregnancy. During my first postpartum I put off seeking help for a while because it all seemed to hard/expensive/impractical. I would've benefited from starting to see a psychologist sooner. During my second pregnancy, I was on a couple of waitlists for support (Gidget and Cope) but only ended up hearing from PANDA in the end.

- Spacious, well-equipped birthing spaces. I was lucky to labour in the newly renovated birthing suites at                      Hospital. I'm well aware that many people don't benefit from these sorts of facilities.
- Compassionate, supportive, well-paid staff. We rely on them in our most vulnerable, most painful, most transformative, most defining moments. Pay them more, and train many more of them, so they can feel equipped to give the care we need.
- Government-funded physio post-partum. Pelvic floor issues are ridiculously common post birth, and it's equally ridiculous to expect people to pay through the nose for necessary treatment. We're talking broken vaginas, broken urethras, broken vulvas, broken anuses. If men gave birth, I have no doubt that physiotherapy would be freely available.