

Submission
No 295

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

I gave birth at Heath Service in 2022. My birth trauma feels mild compared to the stories of my friends. Most mums I've met suffered some form of birth trauma, with some suffering devastating, life altering events. I was lucky in some ways.

Initially, I was paired with a wonderful doctor through the clinic. I was high risk, due to several chronic conditions including systemic lupus erythmatoses and a pain disorder (Fibromyalgia). Not only do I have lupus, but a very rare form which causes my body to react strangely. For example, I cannot produce a high temperature, not am I able to vomit as a rule. This led to horrendous care when I had appendicitis at Heath Service. Because I did not have a fever, nor was I vomiting, my pain was dismissed and surgery was delayed despite my pleas. When the surgery was performed, the tissue had become gangrenous and necrosis had set in, which led to a bowel resection and continuing complications to this day, including a second surgery for a hernia and severe bowel adhesions. My ob/gyn listened and made a point to provide me with continuity of care, seeing me for all my appointments. Sadly, she transferred to another hospital in the middle of my pregnancy and I never received good care after that. I then floated from doctor to doctor, who were all overworked and could not provide me with the care I needed. One senior doctor was downright rude and dismissed my fears which were rooted in my medical history. I elected for a c-section, both because of this history, but also because of my lack of trust in the health care system. My GP advised it, in fact, knowing my history with medical and childhood trauma. She said if I were to have a vaginal birth, the chances of my consent being violated at the very least was unbearably high, not to mention the fact that she did not think doctors would be responsive to my unusual medical situation. Because I went through the public system, I was unable to choose my surgeon. However, knowing my history, my first doctor had ensured I would see a surgeon who had previously operated on me with whom I had a good experience.

As the birth drew closer, I tried to confirm that I would see this particular surgeon. I was told that I would see him, though none too nicely.

I was proactive in getting my needs met, by working hard at informing every person I met on my unique situation. I felt fortunate that I had such experience in the medical system because it allowed me to advocate for myself. One of the key things I did was conduct a very long appointment with the anesthesiology team, outlining the different responses my body has and discussing the impact of my pain disorder. Because I did not get the chance to do the same for my appendix surgery, I was in extreme pain following the surgery. Heath Service has only one overarching pain specialist who is known to both health professionals and patients to be a bully who uses his power to deny patients pain relief. He denied me the pain care I needed which contributed to my ongoing health issues.

I knew this specialist would still be the only person in true control of my pain management post birth, so as there was nothing I could do about that, I tried to get an acceptable pain plan in writing before the birth. Fortunately, the junior anesthesiologist I met with was wonderfully caring and listened and believed what I said. He put together a great plan which covered all

possible eventualities and took my situation into account. It provided me with the necessary additional pain relief I would need following surgery.

When the c-section began, a surgeon I didn't recognise came in. I queried where my planned surgeon was. It took awhile to get a straight answer which amounted to a scheduling error. I wondered how this was possible as I had been regularly calling to ensure my surgeon was lined up. The hospital itself did not pick up on the error until the morning of the surgery. I was not informed that there was a change before the c-section, so was left to deal with this change as my c-section was beginning. This surgeon was uninterested in me as a patient of human being. I had written a cesarean birth plan which was mostly irrelevant as the surgeon was not interested in it at all.

I decided to just roll with it and the caesar went well. It was not until I was back in my room that I realised that the pain plan I made with the anesthesiologist was not enacted. I was not given catheters to deliver pain medication right to the source of the pain - the incision - where my nerves were completely shot. Consequently, when I was able to get up after the c-section, I couldn't, as the pain was too great. I tried to bring this to the doctor's attention as it was really interfering with my ability to care for my newborn, but I was denied access to seeing any doctor. I asked where my pain management plan was told it didn't exist. I explained it most certainly did as I had an hour long appointment to build it. (Later I was told it must have been lost). I asked many times to see a doctor to resolve the issue. I had not even seen a doctor following my c-section, despite my high risk status. I was told I didn't need any pain medication and that the senior doctor would not allow me to have any. Eventually, through the hard work of a midwife, a junior doctor came into my room. I was so relieved that when she asked my husband to leave the room, I assumed she must have had her reasons. My husband wanted to stay as he had a bad feeling about it. I was left alone with her. She looked at me and said, "babe, you're not getting any pain medication." I could not believe that she was speaking to me in such a manner. It felt very condescending and manipulative. I was immediately re-traumatised and reminded of my previous surgeries. I did not feel safe. I asked her to leave the room, my voice shaking.

I was told she felt so upset from the interaction, she found a way to send junior anesthesiologists to treat me. Unfortunately, as the catheters weren't put in during the surgery, I was told local pain blocks had a much higher risk and that I could not use them as often as I would have if I had had the catheters. It was better than nothing, but I should never have had to take the risk as the plan should have been enacted.

One of the ob/gyns then made a special trip to see me and talk about my concerns which was very much appreciated.

In my five days in the hospital, we were barely visited by midwives and nurses. In fact, my bedding was not changed daily and when I requested it be changed as it was quite dirty, a midwife told me she had no time. I tried to ask for help with breastfeeding but was not given

any and instead advised to send my baby to the nursery for a bottle. I declined. We were given no other help with our baby beyond being strongly encouraged to send him to the nursery.

To top it off, my baby did not see a paediatrician until we were due to be discharged five days after he was born, despite the high risk pregnancy. Doctors then scrambled as he had some symptoms of neo-natal lupus which should have been picked up days before. Fortunately, he was fine.