

Submission
No 305

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

I'm 33 years old and live in Sydney and have an 18 month old daughter. My daughter was born at _____ Hospital in January 2022. I went through shared care during pregnancy and as such did not have a private obstetrician.

I had a vaginal delivery via forceps after a relatively straight forward labour - natural dilation to 10cm (with epidural) followed by pushing for approximately one hour. As per hospital policy, I was visited by the obstetrician after one hour of pushing to discuss my options as they were keen to get things moving. I was then presented with my options by the obstetrician which were try a vaginal deliver via forceps and if that did not work, then he would progress with a caesarean. I was firm in only having a caesarean if medically necessary as I am aware the recovery can take weeks to months. At the time of being presented with my options I had been in labour for 27 hours, had an epidural and no sleep and was exhausted and still in some pain as I only had a partial block from the epidural.

When the obstetrician began discussing my options and risks with me and my husband and then having me sign paperwork including waivers and the like, the energy in the room quickly changed from calm, safe and positive (as a direct result of the wonderful midwives) to fast, procedural and made me feel very anxious. My daughter at this time was not distressed, nor was I however the doctor was worried about me becoming too fatigued.

Once in the operating room I was topped up with the epidural, given an episiotomy by the obstetrician and after a few rounds of pushes assisted with forceps, my beautiful baby girl was delivered. I had not a worry in the world as my family grew from two to three with my incredible husband by my side. My daughter was placed on my chest while I was stitched up then she was off to be weighed etc. When we were reunited a short while later in the recovery ward, I saw her swollen torn, bleeding face. The forceps had cut the right side of her face in two places - cut, not marked like it usually does, and she had an incredible swollen face and couldnt open her right eye for two days. This impacted my breastfeeding as each time I needed to feed on my left breast, her cut up face would need to rest on my arm. She was in incredible pain, so much so that the midwives administered paracetamol to a newborn in the maternity ward - a process they told me was rarely undertaken. The paediatrician ensured that the plastic surgeon visit us to consult us on our daughters cut face (this was all by the hospitals own undertaking - none of this was requested by us). Whilst we routinely maintained the cut (cleaning, dressing etc) and she is currently left with a small scar rarely visible by those that don't know her, the plastic surgeon advised us it will be unclear what the scar will look like once her face grows and the skin on her face is stretched. She may need a cosmetic procedure in the future should it become an issue.

During my hospital stay (4 nights) my daughter and I received world class attention from the worlds greatest staff of midwives, all of whom I have the utmost respect for and cannot in words express my gratitude to, for helping me and my daughter throughout those 5 days. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

As my daughter was born via forceps delivery, a physiotherapist from the hospital was required to visit me in the maternity ward to examine my pelvic floor. I had a consult where I was told to do pelvic floor exercises and follow up with the physio in 8 weeks time at the hospital.

At 8 weeks postpartum I made my way to the hospital with my daughter for my follow up appointment. A 45 minute examination with my screaming daughter in tow, whilst I am trying to navigate breastfeeding during the appointment resulted in the physio telling me I have a weak pelvic floor and that a pessary is something I should consider using. Unfortunately, I was told, the public hospital do not undertake pessary fitting so if this is something I'd like to pursue I would need to seek a private womens health physio at my own cost. At this stage I still didn't really know what a pessary was - isn't that something that only old women use??? Given I had no idea what a pessary was, nor was I about to embark on another incredibly anxiety provoking appointment such as the one I just had, it was needless to say I did not seek any further help.

One month later, at 3 months postpartum I had the symptoms of a prolapse, self-diagnosed by myself from google. I booked in with a womens health physio who diagnosed a prolapse and immediately began the process of fitting me with a pessary. My womens health physio is an absolute godsend. She explained the entire process of why it is necessary, what it is, how do we go about fitting one and most importantly made me feel so comfortable and safe. She explained that I have an avulsion tear as a direct result of the forceps used during the delivery. Essentially, half of my pelvic floor was torn off the bone, severely compromising my pelvic floor and resulting in the prolapse.

Over the past 15 months I have had 16 appointments, 5 different pessaries and hundreds and hundreds of dollars out of pocket, I am using a pessary full time now and am still working up to my usual exercise routine. This process whilst easy to write down in a few words cannot possibly explain the impact it has had on my mental health and physical capabilities. I used to run half marathons, of which now seem impossible to achieve.

Why does the public hospital not fit pessaries for women that clearly need it, and why should I be sent off to find private help for something directly resulting from the birth of my baby in that exact hospital?

Whilst I have accepted what has happened and worked through the mental trauma, my physical birth trauma will stay with me for life.

Access to a womens health physio, including the fitting of pessaries where required should be available for all postpartum women within the public hospital at the time when they need it.

Medicare should fund at least 10 sessions within the 12 months after birth. Prolapse is a life long condition and I will need to see a womens health physio six-monthly for the rest of my life.