

Submission
No 361

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

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I have three young sons under 8 (and have experienced 5 miscarriages) and my experiences with childbirth have involved intervention, feeling manipulated and misled, as well as feeling completely undervalued, unheard and disrespected. As a result, this has had detrimental impacts on my wellbeing as a mother, both emotionally and psychologically. This trauma is not left behind when we leave the hospital rather it lives inside mothers, partners, families and health professionals who witness it. It has far reaching consequences for those involved and it is time to change this system that is failing so many women and their families.

Following a miscarriage in 2015, my first son was breech towards the end of my pregnancy in 2016. I was manipulated into believing that if I waited or attempted natural birth, my son had a three times higher chance of “dying” and told in a letter "When we do things to and for our patient we go home to bed and if there is a bad outcome maybe have a couple of nights of disturbed sleep but eventually get over it whereas our patients have to live with the outcomes forever." I feel my obstetrician used my previous experience with pregnancy loss against me. In later years I discovered while he didn't lie, he failed to provide me with all the information to make an informed decision, where the statistic of complications was actually extremely low, less than 1%, and that did not differentiate serious and minor complications. If this statistic were presented to me instead of the "dead baby" card used to coerce me into the birth he wanted, I definitely would have reconsidered a caesarean. I felt pressured into signing for a caesarean and my obstetrician failed to provide evidence-based, unbiased information to allow me to make informed choices before the birth. He sent a letter with very biased research presented to support his opinion and used language that was extremely coercive, misleading and inaccurate. I always felt like I had failed as a mother for not even getting the chance to attempt a vaginal birth, yet this was taken away from me through coercion.

For my second child, I was determined to achieve a VBAC and blindly went with the same obstetrician as he made me believe he was supportive of a VBAC. However, I was told to go into the hospital very early during labour, purely just because I was having a VBAC and as a result, I had my OB in the room talking about himself for many hours on end while I was experiencing contractions and should have had a protected birthing space. I had to use my headphones to drown out his voice when I experienced a contraction. At times, he had a can of diet coke sitting right in front of my vagina on the bed, while conducting vaginal exams that I did not feel he allowed me to fully consent to. I was never asked for permission to conduct these intrusive exams. I felt as though I “had” to go along with what he told me, as he was the doctor. He also had my partner and himself rip my legs back during contractions, which felt extremely intrusive and a violation, not to mention disempowering in this space that became about two men controlling me and the situation, rather than being “my” birth space. It was no surprise that this intrusion resulted with my labour stalling. When my child became stuck towards the end with his head visible and almost entering the world, my obstetrician did not properly explain the situation and my options to allow an informed decision to be made. Instead, he told me he would try the vacuum but would then have to go to a caesarean if it didn't work. At the time, I was under the impression this would occur in the birthing room where I was, however next minute I was being wheeled to theatre and having a spinal administered. This was never explained to me and I became quite confused about the procedure. In hindsight and after becoming more informed during a later pregnancy, I discovered with informed consent and a proper conservation, we could have attempted an

episiotomy to achieve the VBAC I desired (which was required in my following labour). Instead, he prepared me for a caesarean, taking me to theatre and applying the spinal. He "attempted" the vacuum and then said it wasn't working so went straight to the caesarean. My labour was taking quite some time and it was late in the night, so this major surgery was once again performed for convenience (and perhaps the extra money), rather than necessity. I was not supported, respected and provided with accurate information to allow me to make the decisions for MY birth that could have allowed me to feel empowered and in control. This complete disregard for informed consent once again left me feeling manipulated, disrespected and like a failure as I was tricked into a procedure I didn't necessarily need. He later told me my pelvis must be too small and there was a fault with my body.

Following the births of my first two sons, I experienced three more miscarriages. During one of these, I felt completely disrespected and treated as though my experience and emotions did not matter, as though I was disregarded as a human being. After learning my baby would not survive, this same OB was pushing me towards a D&C I did not want. He failed to listen or ask what I wanted and booked in the D&C, which I had experienced previously with my first pregnancy, and did not want to experience again. When I asked about another option to have the miscarriage at home in my safe space, I was told the best thing would be if I just "bled out in the waiting room", so he would administer the drug vaginally before the procedure so I could just bleed out there. The trauma of losing this much-loved baby was hard enough, let alone trying to hold my emotions in while being given this brutal description.

Moreover, while in his surgery and learning my baby would not survive, he received a call to say another patient didn't have cancer as thought. He then spent a long time on the phone with the lab, and on ending the call, proceeded to tell me all about this woman, at a time when I was falling a part and processing the loss of a child once again. He then got her details up on his computer (which I could see) and called her to inform her of the good news, all while I was sitting in front of him, trying not to breakdown and completely fall a part. He spent at least 5 minutes on the phone to this patient and made me sit there, even though our appointment was practically over.

After this experience, I felt very reluctant to use the services of any obstetricians during my seventh pregnancy (third with a child that would live). I had felt completely disrespected and this created a lot of trauma and anxiety for me. Instead, I engaged the services of a private midwife, who helped me heal and process my previous experiences with childbirth and the medical world. She was extremely supportive and helped me overcome fear that emerged following my previous pregnancy trauma. The continuity of care was amazing, and having my appointments at a convenient time in my own home with my whole family made a world of difference. I opted for another Vba2c in a homebirth with two private midwives present, as I found even the thoughts of entering another hospital challenging and overwhelming, especially during COVID restrictions. My birth with my third son was extremely empowering and I felt so supported and heard by my midwife who knew my previous trauma, my desires for this natural birth and really understood me as a mother and a birthing woman. When challenges arose, she allowed me to make informed decisions, rather than manipulating and

misleading me to the choice she desired. While the birth was healing and I achieved my Vba2c, my son experienced meconium aspiration and needed to be transferred to the hospital.

While my son and I received the absolute best care and felt extremely respected by my midwives and the paramedics who treated us (free of judgment about my birth choices), I cannot say this was the case at my local hospital once transferred. I was continuously treated as though I had made bad choices and nurses on the ward were rude and extremely judgmental. They asked questions and queried why I was still talking to my midwife after my son ended up in hospital and did not provide me with the support I required at this very emotional time. At times, the doctors and nurses were giving us exaggerated information to punish us for birthing outside of a hospital. Many nurses in NICU would not let me hold my son to help him heal, even though the head doctor told me there was no medical reason why I couldn't hold him, but it was up to each individual nurse caring for my son in NICU to make that decision. As a result, we missed out on early skin-to-skin and early breastfeeding, which was detrimental to his (and my) ability to heal. I was told he could die in the early days or that he would have brain damage, yet when visiting an extremely experienced Pediatrician when my son was 6 weeks old, he informed me that with the strong Apgar results, this should not have even been mentioned as a possibility, and he strongly suggested I write a letter to the hospital raising this as an area of concern. There was no other explanation except they disapproved with the choices I had made. I was clearly treated differently to other parents in the NICU ward, who were given permission to hold their babies more often and have other support people attend NICU during COVID protocols, when I was not allowed. There was clearly no other reason I was denied the same treatment than the fact of my birth choices, which were actually made due to the past trauma I had experienced in the hospital environment. Consequently, my son took longer to heal than should have been necessary.

This experience followed me into lockdown and created a lot of trauma that required me to regularly access the services of my psychologist once again. I experienced many breakdowns in the first year of my son's life, as a result of flashbacks and anxiety around my experience in NICU. To this day I still experience flashbacks and can be easily triggered.

At a time when I was falling apart, I was treated so harshly and the needs of my baby or myself were not considered a priority. While in the maternity ward I was told I was not allowed to visit my son for hours and made to sit and watch a clock. After sustaining a 3b tear during childbirth, I was told I was not allowed to sit on a cushion in NICU. This felt extremely disempowering, degrading and devastating. The impact of this has continued for years and has led to moments where I have felt like a completely broken mother. I experience high levels of anxiety when having to access medical care through GPs or hospital environments for myself and my children. Consequently, I avoid booking GP visits, particularly for myself, which I fear could be detrimental to my health in the future. Unfortunately these feelings have been further cemented when I unexpectedly fell pregnant again this year and my GP stated "OMG, you're going to be 50 with a 10-year-old", then continually reminded me I was a "geriatric" mother before enquiring about my previous miscarriages and exclaiming "oh well, hopefully nature just takes its course for this one too". Two weeks later I experienced a miscarriage and now, three months on, I still hear those words every single day. Health

professionals desperately need greater training on communicating with parents who are experiencing loss or those who have gone through birth trauma.

As described above, my extensive birth and pregnancy trauma is something that continues to severely impact my role as a mother and woman in society. Urgent changes are needed to allow women to feel safe, respected and valued as birthing mothers, instead of violated and broken. Women should be in the driver's seat of their own labour and birth choices, not relegated to the backseat as so often happens in this patriarchal society, continually told it is in your best interest. It is time for women to reclaim their control over our birth spaces.

The changes or solutions I would like to see to prevent birth trauma and improve respectful maternity care for all women, allowing them to embark on motherhood as empowered and confident mums, rather than broken and traumatised women, include:

- Access to midwife-led continuity of care models for all women that choose this model, not just low-risk, hand selected women (something that is proven through research and personal experience to have huge success)
- Access to birth options such as public funded homebirth, birth Centres, Birthing on Country
- Access to unbiased evidence based information without coercion
- Legislation on informed consent
- Regular mandatory trauma-informed training for all clinicians, regardless of their status or experience in the medical field
- More funding for postpartum care such as women's health physiotherapists, lactation consultants, social workers, psychologists
- Improved support for early pregnancy loss and abortions
- Improved training for all health professionals around all types of pregnancy loss and stillbirth, including the emotional impact for women and their families and how to support women in subsequent pregnancies.
- More discussions about informed consent in the public arena so women have an understanding of their rights
- Educational classes such as Calmbirth, to be free and available to all birthing women and partners so they can learn and understand their rights as a birthing mother and feel empowered, rather than intimidated and controlled (instead of the outdated and extremely basic birthing course I did with my first son through the private hospital I was birthing at, which did not prepare me for birth and labour at all).

Thank you for this opportunity to share the devastating trauma I have experienced during my eight pregnancies (which has resulted in three living children). I know I am a strong, resilient mother despite living with the impacts of trauma. But the thing is I shouldn't have to be strong and resilient to make it through the trauma of childbirth. I shouldn't have to worry about flashbacks or panic attacks when seeking medical care. I shouldn't feel inferior and defeated when reliving my birth stories. So I share my story in the hope that other women get to enter

motherhood feeling empowered, respected and supported during birth and beyond to be the best mothers they can be, not in spite of trauma, but a transition to motherhood free from trauma. That is what every woman deserves.