

Submission
No 341

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

Date Received: 15 August 2023

Partially
Confidential

In November 2022, I was induced at 41+1 weeks pregnant. I gave birth to my child at Hospital, NSW.

What was meant to be a happy event meeting our baby was both traumatic and did not go as I had envisioned. In the lead up to the birth I was subjected to instances of being dismissed and not respected as a first-time mother. During my pregnancy, whilst I had a consistent midwife for most (but not all) of my appointments, I was not comfortable with the midwife as they always rushed through our appointments and instead of answering my questions, they would often suggest that I “google this information” to find out more about my queries. We did not discuss birth options during any of my antenatal appointments. I was told to read the brochure that I was handed which was very outdated and did not include the most recent research or health advice. We also didn't discuss ways to manage pain that I was experiencing during pregnancy. In fact, my pain was dismissed and I was told 'this happens to some people, but not all, but you'll be right'. I then had to see a physio who specialises in women's health who was able to diagnose my issue and treat it appropriately. I was also told by the midwife to perform an insertion test myself, despite being heavily pregnant and obviously not a healthcare professional myself, so its possible the test results were inaccurate since I had to perform the test myself, with great difficulty. At my 40 week check-up, we did not discuss induction or my options around this. I was simply booked in for a 41 week appointment and then dismissed. I attended my 41 week appointment, and without consultation was told I'd need to stay overnight and be induced. No discussion about whether I was happy to be induced at that specific time, or If I felt prepared, no questions about my birth plan, and no discussion around my options for the method of induction. On 3rd November 2022, they inserted a balloon catheter into my cervix to induce labour whilst I stayed overnight in hospital.

On the 4th of November I gave birth to my child. However, labour felt completely out of my control. At 5cm dilated, I was told that I wasn't having contractions and that the pain I was feeling was “just my body getting ready for contractions”. I then had to walk myself unaccompanied along with my bags, to the birth unit, whilst having contractions. I had multiple student nurses practicing on me throughout the day. They broke my waters, and offered epidural. The doctor who inserted the needle for epidural failed twice. Nearly 2 hours had passed and I was still hunched over the edge of the bed, managing contractions whilst being told to stay still so they could get the epidural needle into my spine. It was exhausting and unbelievably uncomfortable. The failed attempts left severe bruising on my lower back which lasted two weeks post partum. It was during this time that my baby changed positions too which added another layer of discomfort. After various attempts to get my baby out vaginally, it was decided in the evening that an emergency c-section was the best option. It was not a discussion, it felt more like they'd already decided for me.

During the c-section, I lost 1.6 Litres of blood, my baby suffered from minor respiratory issues and had a lot of mucus built up too. It wasn't until post-surgery that I found out they used forceps to remove her, even though nobody asked me, and nobody notified me that it was happening or why it needed to happen at that time.

In recovery, they asked If I wanted to breastfeed, I attempted, but I was exhausted post surgery. So they took my baby and fed her formula instead.

On November 5th 2022, I was experiencing abdominal discomfort, which got progressively worse as the day went on. My stomach had blown up like a balloon, and if you touched it, it

sounded like a drum. I had intense pain by the evening. I should note, I had gone all day with zero consultation with a lactation consultant despite me raising concerns over my ability to breastfeed. Because the pain in my stomach was rapidly worsening, a midwife took my baby as I was escorted around the hospital on a bed so they could run various scans on me. Due to my trauma, I cannot fully recall everything that happened. But what I do know is that I had an ultrasound, and x-ray, and an MRI. Its possible I had other scans done, but my memory is blurred on some details. It was evident that I had both a bowel and bladder obstruction, both caused by the emergency c-section. I later found out that these complications are often due to the specific type of induction that was used on me.

On the 6th November, I still hadn't met with a lactation consultant, and by now the midwives were feeding my child more than me since I was in and out of scans and dealing with pain. Therefore, my ability to breastfeed was highly impacted, which added to my stress and anxiety. I hadn't had much time spent with my child which also added to my stress and anxiety which I believe has assisted in the development of my trauma.

I then had two doctors attempt to insert an NG tube down to my stomach. This process was excruciating – probably worse than receiving the epidural or experiencing the contractions during labour. They failed to get the tube down the first 4 times, and I was choking and coughing up the water they insisted I drink whilst they attempted to put the tube in. They eventually realised that the tube they were trying to insert was too thick, and I needed something thinner. On the 7th November 2022, my baby was admitted into NICU and then later special care, because according to the midwives in the maternity ward, my baby was “not feeding well”. I still had not yet met with a lactation consultant at this point, despite my requests. I also never received a breast pump. However, I received an enema to help with my bowels, and later got an iron infusion due to the blood loss during the c-section. My baby being taken to NICU/Special care almost broke me. I felt like the longer I was in hospital the more problems started to arise, and I wanted us both out of there ASAP. I was losing so much precious time with my baby, my fiancé was also missing out on spending time with us both as he was not able to stay with us in hospital. It caused all of us a lot of stress and heartache.

On the 8th November 2022, I met with a social worker in the hospital who had said she could arrange for a meeting with me since my baby was in special care and I was quite emotional about my whole experience. She booked me in for the 10th November 2022.

On the 9th November 2022, I was finally discharged, and it was upon my discharge that I was informed I hadn't been receiving the pain relief that I was meant to be receiving during my 8 stay, and that is why I was often in more pain than I needed to be. I was also told I would need to insert a needle into my stomach every day for 10 days when I am home to assist with the complications I experienced. Despite me being discharged, my baby was still in special care. I refused to leave the hospital without my baby as I was certain there were no feeding issues. It wasn't until this day that I was offered a breast pump and a meeting with a lactation consultant and a speech therapist who would assist with feeding issues with my baby. I was highly stressed at this point, feeling like I had failed labour, failed being a mother, and my baby was suffering because of it. Nobody could explain to me why my baby had to remain in special care. There were no clear signs of difficulty feeding. My baby had no issue feeding on formula, and had started to have some of my colostrum now that I had access to a breast pump. After a lot of pushing on my behalf, I managed to secure an overnight stay in a parent room adjacent to the special care unit. My fiancé and I stayed the night and were determined to get my baby discharged the very next day.

On the 10th November, 2022, the social worker failed to attend the meeting she set up with me and sent me a text message to reschedule, but since I had been discharged she said that she could line me up with a birth trauma consultant if it was something I was interested in. I agreed and said please arrange this, I am very interested in meeting with a trauma consultant. I was aware I was not feeling ok and didn't want to put off managing my mental health as I didn't want it to affect my ability to look after my newborn baby.

After a huge debate with the staff, I was able to get my baby discharged because they could provide an adequate reason as to why my baby had to remain in special care or in hospital at all.

On 11th November, I returned to the hospital for a check-up for my baby and for myself so they could remove the bandage and check my incision from surgery.

In December 2022, after making several phone calls myself, I finally got in contact with a birth trauma consultant. However, because it was December, they couldn't get me into an appointment until late January 2023, over 2 months after labour.

In January 2023, I attended the meeting with the birth trauma consultant and a midwife. Whilst I am glad I had this meeting, I am disappointed by the fact I had to chase this meeting up, and that it was so long after my labour, because a lot of my memory had faded and I came home with a lot of unanswered questions. It was almost a case of too little too late. If I had met with someone just 1-week post partum, I firmly believe it could have eased some of the pressure I was experiencing and perhaps even reduce a lot of my anxiety and distress. My headspace in the first 2 months post-partum was the darkest I've ever experienced in my life, and it wasn't even due to having a newborn to look after. It was purely because I was dealing with flashbacks of surgery, high levels of anxiety around feeding my child and breastfeeding, my inability to move around due to surgery, my constant fear that I had failed labour, and the guilt associated with that as well as the guilt I still carry about the time I lost with my baby and her father in those first few days. It was just overall an awful experience.

If I could recommend one thing to change to prevent birth trauma and improve care it would be severely improved support for the birth mother post partum. More emphasis on consulting the mother during this time is absolutely necessary, rather than just a 6-week physical check where they ask about your use of contraception – I needed someone to reassure me about what I experienced and that how I was feeling was not at all my fault and a direct result of the experience that I had. I should not have been left to deal with that on my own when a lot of the process was never anything I chose.

There were so many things that happened that I was consulted about, or provided with information to help me make informed decisions. There were situations and things that occurred that I didn't know I could ask about or say no to, because nobody tells you anything. At the end of it all, nobody provides you with the full details of what occurred during your labour, which for many, could potentially help with working through the trauma inflicted and experienced.

Things need to change for the better.