

Submission  
No 412

## INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

**Name:** Name suppressed

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Partially  
Confidential

I have had three births, all of which had me face difficulties because of our health systems.

The first birth was in [REDACTED] at [REDACTED] Hospital. I was so excited when I found out I was pregnant, and after seeing my GP I called to schedule my first antenatal appointment. After expecting to not be seen until 13 weeks, I was told that I was booked in for the following Tuesday. I was surprised it was so soon, and was told 'we like to get these things sorted quickly', and that I would need to take the whole day off work. When I asked why and what they would do, she said all that information would be sent in my info pack. When this pack arrived, while my husband was away for work, I opened the envelope to read 'All about your abortion'. This was devastating. Instead of the life within me being celebrated, I had been booked for the wrong appointment with no checking or confirmation. When I called to let them know, they did not apologise but told me that the staff are only human and everyone makes mistakes, with no regard for the deep psychological impact this moment had on me.

When I finally had my first antenatal at 13 weeks, I was placed in a high risk category because of a benign connective tissue disorder - unbeknownst to me my care providers had assumed I had a more serious disorder despite my insistence otherwise and without any genetic counselling to confirm this. I later found out a woman with this other serious condition had died in labour the previous year - obviously the staff were still reeling, and this was affecting their clinical decision making. I was bullied into echocardiograms, a CT, an MRI, multiple ultrasounds and privy to conversations between the obstetrician and physician about their concerns - a fight on the physician's side about scheduling a C section in case my aorta dissected in labour (not at all associated with condition I actually have) and the obstetrician suggesting if that happened then I'd never be able to have children again because of how I scar. The obstetrician followed up her comment about my scarring with '40% of women need C sections anyway and there's nothing you can do about that'. I struggled to process that I was being told to choose between possibly dying in labour and never having children again, knowing in the back of my mind that this shouldn't be true for my situation. As a clinical educator, I went through the literature to find support for my condition being benign, including during pregnancy, but both doctors quietly thanked me before placing my literature review and all the supporting evidence underneath a large stack of papers without so much as glancing at them.

Despite knowing that my condition was benign, the power of the medical authority meant I left my fortnightly antenatal appointments terrified and feeling very unsupported. Later on during the pregnancy, I shared my hope for a natural labour, and the obstetrician laughed in my face and said that was the dream of 'silly little girls'. After each appointment I would work hard to calm myself down over the following days, but with such regular appointments my entire pregnancy was shrouded in fear, frustration, and stress. I used my research skills to explore natural birthing, prepared myself well for labour, and had what I can only describe as a 'magical' labour at home.

However, once we arrived at hospital, things went quickly downhill. First, we had to arrive through emergency, where we passed people drunk, vomiting, yelling, and bloody. These

images burned into my mind, in a way an emergency department never had before or has since. Then we we arrived at the labour ward, the midwife loudly announced that there was meconium on my towel, setting me into a mild panic as at 38 weeks and after only 6 hours of labour, meconium would suggest my baby was in distress. She quickly realised it was a shadow and some dirt on the towel, but did not apologise, leaving me to bring my adrenalin levels down myself and try to regain my birthing focus.

I was then led to what must have been a storage room for examination, as I had to climb over equipment, boxes and a trolley to get to the bed. I was asked what kind of birth I wanted, and replied 'as natural as possible but whatever needs to be done to keep baby safe' and was asked if I'd done hypnobirthing. When I replied that I hadn't, but that I knew my body could do this, the midwife laughed at me and called me naive. This deeply hurt, and I felt embarrassed and small, a deep contrast from the power and joy I had experienced labouring at home. She then told me I probably wasn't in labour - I replied that I was in transition and the baby was close. She again laughed at me and said 'you're a first time mother, everyone says that and everyone is wrong'. She said she needed to do a VE and that I should be prepared to go home. I consented to the VE, but was not prepared for the extreme pain as she roughly moved her hand around my vagina. It was a psychologically disturbing and confusing experience, one that felt like sexual abuse even though I cognitively understood it was routine clinical practice. As I held back tears she abruptly said, ok you're 9cm dilated we need to get you a room - I had known exactly how far along I was, but she did not acknowledge this nor apologise for her comments about me not knowing nor her roughness. I wished I could go back home and birth alone, in the safety of the knowing my body offered me.

We moved to the room I would give birth in, and she asked where I wanted to birth. I said I didn't want the bed, maybe the mat, but that I needed to get in the shower, which I had used at home for effective labour management. After she had set up the mat she announced it was time to leave the shower. I couldn't talk at this point, but knew I needed to stay under the water. She put her hands on my arms and yanked, trying to pull me out of the shower even while I was having contractions, telling me how much effort she'd gone to to set the mat up, why did I ask her to do that if I wasn't going to birth there, what a waste of her time and effort. I was still unable to talk, and could only mumble 'um', though inside I was screaming 'what is wrong with you?! Leave me alone! I'm allowed to change my mind, and how hard is it to get out a mat??'. Eventually, she said well you can labour here but I can't let you push the baby out here or it'll drown and give it hyperthermia from being wet. Even in my deep labour state and as a first time mother I remember thinking, this is insane, she's making this up. As I laboured, I felt very uncomfortable with the midwife's aggressive arm-crossed stance in front of the door, which made me feel like I was trapped and 'observed', and like I was doing something wrong. It was very hard to get back in the 'zone' I'd had at home, and the stark contrast between that space and the treatment I was receiving was distracting me from what was happening. I did not feel safe here - I felt unsupported and scared, but still dug deep to believe I could do it. But then the midwife began repeating 'stand still I can't find the baby's heartbeat' when trying to get the Doppler on WHILE I was having contractions. She said 'your baby isn't moving through the canal like it should be, this is taking too long', enough times that in my 'altered labour mind' state, I suddenly remembered every scary conversation that had been had during the pregnancy between the care providers. At that point (not realising

that I had only been pushing for 40 minutes, and that for a first time birth this was well within normal time frames), I visibly saw the room split down the middle with a black line, and because of her statements I thought 'oh my god, I've killed my baby'. In an effort to get the baby out as quickly as possible, I pushed with everything in me even though I didn't have a contraction, with such force that my husband and the midwife heard the baby cry while in the vaginal canal. I didn't know it then, but I was already traumatised.

As we walked to the bed once she was born, I said to my husband, 'I don't think this is our baby, do you think they've accidentally brought us the wrong one?' He looked at me and said, 'she's still attached to you.' I looked down, and saw the umbilical cord still connected. I felt no connection to my baby, and was still in shock. I had wanted a physiological third stage, but 10 minutes after she was born, they told me I was haemorrhaging so I consented to synton for a managed 3rd stage. They cut the cord, much sooner than I had wanted, (and I later found out that I had only lost 400ml - a far cry from any haemorrhage cut off.) and soon the shock began to process. I shook uncontrollably, to the point where I couldn't hold my baby or control my body - my body was releasing some of the shock. It was much more aggressive and disturbing than I would have with my subsequent births. I thanked the midwife as she left, she loudly said I'd got what I wanted because all I wanted was a healthy baby. I found this confusing at the time, but really only began processing that statement in later years, and was then filled with fury at her dismissal of what was a truly traumatising experience.

However, the story wasn't over - as I tried to breastfeed, still in the birthing room, I found it excruciating and was blistered even before we transferred to the postnatal ward. There, I was given no breastfeeding support, was left for hours in the middle of the night with a screaming baby despite calling for help many times, and told off for going out to the nurse's station. My nipples were bleeding and my baby was waking frequently unsettled and hungry. When I asked a midwife what she thought was happening, she said it was probably because I have fair skin (I am caucasian with southern European heritage - my skin could be a lot fairer than it is), and left the room. The midwife doing the postnatal home visits would often just make a phone call instead of coming in, saying 'you're ok aren't you? You don't need me to come see you'. Because I was still processing the shock, I didn't know how to say, no I'm not ok, and my baby isn't ok either.

I developed mastitis within the first five days, and my baby was distressed, screaming for many hours a day. She would not sleep for longer than 2 hours at a time, often waking every 20-30 minutes. I was told to express, but when she wouldn't take a bottle I was told I just had to deal with the pain - I cried through every feed and was in constant burning pain. I ended up with postnatal depression and psychosis, hearing voices, seeing hallucinations, and having suicidal ideations. I presented to both my GP and CAFHS nurse for help and was told I was just sleep deprived and that I should sleep train my (hungry) baby. When I said I couldn't do this, that I could hear she was in pain and needing help, I was told that I was making my own bed. What should have been a wonderful transition in my life was instead marked with unsupportive and at times abusive care, being lied to, tricked, and not offered help even when requested. Both my baby and I could have died due to the mental impacts of this experience, and DESPITE PRESENTING FOR HELP, I was again not offered support. How we did not become

statistics, I will never know. It took me years to bond with her. There is nothing ok about this story. And, given it was clinically uneventful, the problems stem entirely from my treatment by the system - in bedside manner, respect, psychological safety (lack thereof), physical handling and clinical decision making.

### Second Birth

For my second birth, I changed hospitals to [REDACTED] and was immediately offered a place in the home birth team. This birth was only 3 hours from first contraction to arrival, a little less than half the length of my first labour, and my midwife had been wonderfully supportive. Having remembered how the first midwife had treated me when I knew I was in transition, she asked me to guess how far along I was on arrival, and I said 3-4 cm. She did a VE and laughed, 'oh my god, you're right. You really do know your body'. That statement was so healing. However, towards the end of the labour in the birth pool, my body pushed me up to standing, I could feel the baby close to crowning. I felt the hands of my midwife on my shoulders and she pushed me down saying 'you need to get into a deep squat'. As I began to squat, I feel a horrific burning pain shoot through my pelvis and began writhing, trying desperately to find some relief. She said to me, 'you're not breathing well, you need to get your breathing back', as I tried to manage the intensity of what was happening. I finally could lie back, but couldn't control the pushing because of the pain - I couldn't coordinate my pelvic floor muscles properly. She was born quickly, but soon after she was born I began having excruciating pain through my pelvis which my midwife said was involution, 'you poor thing'. The pain increased over the following days and by day three I was unable to move or breathe during the waves of pain coming through my body. We presented to hospital, and were met by my husband's cousin who is a midwife. I tried to be as helpful as possible to the doctor, telling her which muscles and ligaments I could feel involved. She took the clinical staff out of the room, then came back into the room and said, we can't help you, you need to go home. I asked her, surely someone can help me, I can't take this pain anymore, there is something wrong with my body. She said, 'we can give you two Panadol, but no one here will help you'. My husband's cousin later told me that she said, 'who the hell does this woman think she is, is she trying to school me on anatomy? No one shows me up. None of us will treat her.' A few days later, I felt the pain come up over the iliac crest on my left side and realised - this is something else, this isn't involution, and saw a physio. Months later diagnostics revealed I had torn my pelvis. As a woman with ligamentous laxity and SPD, I should not have been put into a deep squat, and I should most definitely have been offered help at hospital. It took me months to walk around the block, and almost two years to be pain free. I could not care for my children properly due to my inability to walk and the pain in my pelvis. I could not run with my toddler and was exhausted from the constant pain, so could not play with her gently either. Basic housework was nearly impossible and we could not afford a cleaner or help. This situation again was entirely the fault of the clinical staff - my body had moved me to standing, which is supported in the literature as a position for women with SPD. Knowing that I had SPD, she should not have put me in a squat. Years of pain and dysfunction as the result of clinical incompetence.

### Third Birth

My third birth was in the [REDACTED] during Covid. I was in the [REDACTED] Hospital, and was told my midwife would be able to check on me 'on the way' to the hospital. I said

this was good because I had a very strong feeling that the labour would be too fast for me to get to the hospital, and that with each previous birth I had known things about my body that turned out to be true, and that she needed to listen. The hospital clamped down on this policy because of a rise in 'accidental on purpose' freebirths, and she told me at 37 weeks that she could not come visit me during labour, but it probably wouldn't matter as I'd probably make the hospital anyway. I knew that I wouldn't, and told her so, but her response was 'if so, your best bet would be to hire a private midwife'. I did not have the \$8000 that I was quoted to do this, especially given all my antenatal care had already been taken care of. I realised I had to plan a 'back up' freebirth, because there was a good chance I wasn't going to make the hospital half an hour away. As predicted, labour started, progressed incredibly fast, and I could not organise myself to get in the car due to the intensity. She was born half an hour later in our bedroom. My husband was on the phone to the midwife when he saw a head and quickly called an ambulance. The midwife was still not allowed to attend our house and check on me, even though she had a kit in her car. Everybody was fine, but I was furious that we had been forced into a freebirth situation which could have gone very differently, purely because of an arbitrary rule. I was then discharged from postnatal care at only 4 days, with no follow up. I again felt deeply unsupported by the hospital system.

My transition to motherhood was marked by pain, suffering, and abandonment by those supposed to be caring for women and babies. I frequently hear, 'all that matters is a healthy baby'. But a baby CANNOT be healthy without a healthy mother. And women matter too. My life was derailed by the experience of my first baby. I have picked myself up and changed my trajectory, no thanks to the hospital system. Things must change.