

Submission
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INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

In 2016 I fell pregnant with my first child. I was 31 and had been lucky enough to have a healthy pregnancy. I started antenatal visits via [REDACTED] in Sydney. I was confident in the public health system and thought doulas or birth support classes were for hippies. Little did I know that in order to avoid birth trauma and have your best chance at a natural or positive birth that women had to pay for these extra support people to ensure it....because the system is sadly broken and doesn't provide the emotional or physical care that birthing women need. It shouldn't be the luck of the draw, we should all have access to a positive birth experience devoid of coercion and unnecessary surgery. The catch cry of interventionists is that caesareans and modern medicine have saved the lives of women and babies, but how so when our still birth rate has remained unchanged for over two decades? All we are doing is leaving women stitched and broken sending them home with a 'healthy' baby should be the minimum birth outcome we seek. Women deserve better in our public and private hospitals. And the attitude of health care providers needs to change to reflect that.

We did a general birth class and that was the only education we undertook. In that class there was no discussion of caesarean's care risks or process. Every appointment saw me waiting at least two hours in the birth clinic to be seen by a midwife or ob gyn. While I couldn't complain about the care I received, urinary tract infections were missed and communication was poor. The sheer the number of women being seen meant we were all just a number in a busy understaffed clinic. I sought to birth in [REDACTED] in the hopes of not only receiving more 1:1 care and ultimately an intervention free birth. There I met a midwife who was more tune with the ethos of what women really needed and wan My waters broke on my due date, I was told to stay home till contractions became more intense but overnight they disappeared. The next day the clinic told me to come in. At this stage contractions were more than 5 mins apart and the birth centre refused to admit me till they were closer together. As my waters had been broken for more than 12 hours an ob gyn came to see me and told me that the risk of infection to my baby increased every hour thereafter if I was not induced. I later discovered this information to be inaccurate and other women had been given longer time frames to be admitted....from then on I was told that I was risking my baby's health or life if I did not transfer to birth ward and accept an induction. Not knowing any better my husband and I agreed and were transferred to the birth ward.

It was here where the first nurse tried to insert my cannula , failing to find a vein she left the room to find another nurse to try. The second nurse tried and failed to insert the cannula leaving my arm bruised and sore. They called in a Dr who then had to place the cannula on the back of my hand to find a vein despite the uncomfortableness of its location. The first midwife I had a great rapport with and as the labour steadily progressed I felt I was able to manage the pain and the induction drip was not ramped up. She left her shift and changed over with a younger less experienced midwife who barely acknowledged my presence. She spent the majority of the time writing and completing paperwork then came to me to say that my sons heart rate was in distress. She insisted on inserting a catheter which was incredibly uncomfortable she believed by inserting this they would be able to empty my bladder which would assist in his descent. I wasn't happy with this but I felt couldn't say no. Similarly I was told that due my sons heart rate not being able to pick up a reading that they needed to place a screw on his skull in order to gain a more accurate reading. Again I was in active labour and not comfortable with this but it was presented to me as the only option. At soMe point I

became so distressed and uncomfortable that I ripped the cannula out of my hand. When I was vocalising my discomfort the midwife told me to be quiet to stop screaming. At this point I felt that no one could help me- least of all this midwife who I didn't trust or know. And who didn't seem to be giving me any alternatives. An ob gyn was called in as my baby's heart rate continued to drop and remain in distress. The obgyn had me on my back and discovered my son although descending had his head facing upwards and with each contraction his heart rate was not recovering. I was told that I risked his life if we were not to go in immediately for an emergency caesarean. I was told I could continue to try to push but that we had to make our way down to the theatre.

When we arrived a clipboard was placed into my hands to sign as I was experiencing excruciating back to back contractions with no pain relief. The document said amongst other things that if I undertook the caesarean I understood I may end up with a hysterectomy. I didn't feel comfortable signing the legally binding document which was being presented to me at my most vulnerable moment where I was not able to comprehend it's contents or provide informed consent. Again the midwife waved my concerns away- oh a hysterectomy is very rare she said. I signed. I asked my pain relief as we were waiting, I was told the woman in front of me was experiencing a life threatening haemorrhage and that I had to wait. I was lying on my back writhing in pain in the small pre theatre room feeling completely powerless to do anything about it. As the doors opened even though it was the last place I wanted to be on the day of my first birth, I felt relief as the anaesthetist introduced themselves and started to put in my spinal. A screen was placed up between myself and the operation I started to shake uncontrollably and although I felt no pain I felt sure I was about to die. After a long time I asked my husband what was going on why was there no crying of a baby or nothing happening. He went over to consult with the team who advised him that CPR was being performed on my son who was born not breathing. He returned to give me this information. A trolley containing my son and a huge mask over his face was wheeled past me. "This is your son, we need to take him to NICU he is having some trouble breathing" was all I was told. I could not hold him or touch him. I also didn't know how or why he was in the condition he was in. No information was provided to me. My husband attended nicu During what felt like half an hour the drs stitched me up but I was told nothing. I kept shaking I felt incredibly cold. I was taken into recovery. Alone I was left to lay there shaking and cold. I had no idea what was happening to my son or where my husband was. I felt dizzy and disconnected from the room. I managed to ask a nurse to call nicu and find out if they were ok. She told me my son needed help breathing but that he was ok. Eventually I was wheeled up to a ward. Firstly I was taken to a shared room where I woman had her baby with her. My arms were empty and I still had no knowledge of when I would meet my baby or see my husband. I told the midwife could they please find me another room. To their credit they found me a private room. It was dark and I had no idea what time it was. I felt excruciating pain and couldn't move. I had no way of contacting anyone or of being taken down to nicu. I had to sit and wait for my husband to come back to the ward. Eventually he returned and we attempted to sleep- him on the floor and me on the hospital bed feeling completely numb.

It wasn't till 11am the next day that hospital staff took me down in a wheelchair to meet my son for the first time in NICU.

I was told he had a shadow on his lungs, which would self correct. A midwife from the birth centre told me “the cord was wrapped” yet no medical staff at any time were able to confirm or deny this. Though the passage still appears in the medical file. No one came up to me and verbally told me that this is what happened. I still to this day have no clear explanation for why my birth ended in an emergency Caesarean and why my son couldn’t breathe.

Breastfeeding in nicu was difficult but the staff there were exceptional. It was there a nurse told me to seek something more than Panadol for my pain and physically came up with me to the ward to ensure I received adequate pain relief. At the time I felt anger towards my birth outcome, and confusion. I felt I had failed my body and my child and I had no explanation as to why.

A debrief with the birth centre midwife somewhat helped but in hindsight these conversations served to absolve the hospital of their responsibility. It was only to ensure they had justified their decisions.

This story has been hard for me to write but I am writing it to ensure NSW and beyond are aware of what occurs within our maternity wards. Why women everywhere have had to pay for private midwives (should they be so lucky as to afford it) to ensure adequate maternal care. To cover for where the systems fails them. And not all women had experienced births like mine- many get “lucky” but birth is such a variable experience that of course this happens.

The impact this birth had on my relationship with my son as a parent was huge. I struggled and still struggle to bond with him. I struggled to love him. Postpartum I would wake every night sweating and not knowing where I was. Convinced he wasn’t breathing or had been lost in the bedsheets. I would scream and my husband would have to settle me down.

I was not able to go ahead with a subsequent pregnancy because I feared the same outcomes. The trauma of ending that pregnancy only retraumatized me and filled me with guilt. I felt unable to mind my son alone, I willed the days to end. I found him a baby impossible to settle. I struggled but I hid my struggle as I didn’t want anyone to think that I was not able to cope.

I went on to have another child and a better birth, but the fear of the hospital maternity system never left me. I have had numerous abortions as a result of feeling I couldn’t go ahead with another horrible birth.

I was able to help other women by hearing their stories of birth trauma particularly caesareans and a friend and I completed VBAC Birth Stories a podcast which garnered a huge following. After three years we have left the project as we were unable to continue to give it

the time it deserved. We were never short of stories. What struck me was the similarity of all these stories. Trauma became the rule rather than the exception.

My hope is for this enquiry to see the value in 1:1 midwifery led care and continuity of care models across hospitals. I also feel that caesarean education should be mandatory and given to all birthing women regardless of their intentions to birth naturally. Homebirth should be presented as a more viable option and funded publicly. Even though I could never birth at home I have witnessed the exceptional experiences women have been able to receive having private midwife care at home. Please listen to the countless women and what they are telling us about their births. We risk a generation of birth trauma if we aren't able to do better. Thankyou.