

Submission
No 432

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

Date Received: 12 August 2023

Partially
Confidential

My pregnancy and birth recovery process were both extremely difficult for me. From the day the test turned positive, I was sick. I was nauseous up until 20 weeks. I lost 8 kilograms. When I told people what was happening to me, most people sighed, smiled and told me it happened to them too, or it happened to someone they knew and that it would be over soon. It felt really dismissive and 20 weeks felt like a lifetime. My obstetrician was extremely supportive and prescribed me with medication straight away. At 28 weeks, I was diagnosed with gestational diabetes. My obstetrician rang me with the results 2 days before Christmas. She told me not to worry, to eat normally and that she would organise for a class and for me to get my blood glucose meter. It ended up being a long wait over new years.

I was anxious the whole time. I also developed a heart problem where I was experiencing tachycardia every time I stood up and walked around. It got progressively worse and sent me into hospital at 31 weeks. The staff at hospital had no idea what was wrong with me. They gave me potassium and magnesium through a drip and called it a day. It mildly helped but the issue continued to get worse. I was sent to a cardiologist and after an echocardiogram and 24hr holter monitoring, I was told that it's probably pregnancy related and to come back postpartum if it continues. So, by the end of my pregnancy, to be precise, the last 6-8 weeks, I was basically disabled. I had to take sick leave from work. I couldn't move around and I couldn't eat anything. By the end of the pregnancy, everything spiked my blood sugar. It was horrendous. My nausea was also making a slight comeback.

I was very mentally and physically drained. I was depressed and anxious but yet to see the signs. No one around me saw the signs either. So, one Wednesday morning, when I started leaking, my obstetrician suggested an induction and I was all ears. I was so ready to not be pregnant anymore. I went into hospital and had my first round of cervadil. A super rough, scratchy, tampon like device. It was extremely painful. I immediately felt unwell. I spent the night with the cervadil inside, and the next morning I was checked. Unfortunately, I needed another round. I was given gas to breathe in while the cervadil was taken out and the new one was put in. That's how painful it was. I was screaming. Eventually, my contractions began and I was feeling hopeful that the cervadil would work.

By 6pm, I was checked again (with the gas - which was not enough) after screaming my way through the procedure, I was told I was dilated enough to have my waters broken. Everything went pretty smoothly from there. I was given some time to relax and contract. I was given a choice as to whether to pitocin was started in the morning or that night and I was given the option of any pain relief. I chose to get started right away and chose to have an epidural. It was almost midnight and I received the epidural within 20 minutes. I went to bed and woke up at 8am and was told that it was time to push.

I didn't really feel anything whilst I pushed which was good. We tried some different positions because the baby's head got stuck at one point. I had been pushing for about 90 minutes and was told that the obstetrician would use the vacuum if the baby didn't come out in the next few pushes. I was okay with this. Inevitably, the vacuum was used. On the baby's way out, I heard an internal pop. As I was getting stitched up, I told my doctor and she said it would be

investigated. Almost immediately, the epidural was stopped and I felt so much pain. Initially, I felt pain because the pitocin drip was still going, as I had lost a lot of blood. I was told my uterus needed to contract down.

This was excruciating. I rolled around in bed screaming, while my baby was rushed off to special care with low blood sugar. Not long after, my catheter was removed and I was given the option to have a shower. Not the best idea, considering I was so woozy from losing all that blood but I somehow managed. I saw my baby for a quick breastfeed but I wasn't overly interested because I was in so much pain. Due to the pop I heard and pain, I had a suspected fractured coccyx. I had my baby on a Friday. I didn't get to have an X-ray on my coccyx until Monday. I was in so much pain. I couldn't walk, or move, or roll over in bed. It was excruciating. I was put on painkillers and I'm sure they were working but it was hard to believe at the time. I spent 8 days in the hospital all up. 6 of those were postpartum days. On day 3, I had a blood transfusion.

I had almost fainted. It wasn't until that happened, a midwife checked my blood results and realised I needed a transfusion immediately. That was scary. My baby was in and out of special care until day 2. I barely saw him the first 2-3 days. I missed his first feed, his first nappy change, and it felt like I missed everything because everything else was from the side of the bed. I didn't properly change his nappy until we got home. I haven't even mentioned that we had our baby in March, during that week were the 3 hottest days in March recorded. We were in a room the size of a cardboard box and it was uncomfortably hot. It was stifling. The air conditioning wasn't working....in a hospital! My mum went to reception and begged for another room. We got a lovely, larger, cool room...the day before we left the hospital (on day 8). It was extremely traumatic.

I really struggled to breastfeed. Baby latched perfectly and despite my limited positioning (I could only breastfeed lying down on my side) we still managed so well. The issue was that my baby was given formula and told to feed precisely every two hours due to low blood sugar levels. My milk had not come in so whilst he was latching and drinking - there was not enough there for him. My husband and I asked for formula top ups. Depending on the midwife on duty, there was often a mixed bag of reposes. Overall, we felt ashamed to be using formula. We felt that the midwives didn't care if our baby was hungry and cried all night, that I should be breastfeeding him constantly. This may be fine to do if you can sit up in bed. I could only lie down. This meant falling asleep numerous times with baby in the bed with me and there was also the risk of me being 'high' on extremely strong painkillers. When I told the midwives my concerns about the risks, I was shrugged off and told that I was getting acquainted with 'co-sleeping' early. I was so shocked.

When we were leaving, I had full intentions of continuing formula at home (mixed feeding) but wasn't sure how to calculate how much formula to give the baby. I was questioned and judged about this decision. I was told if I wasn't to breastfeed, I shouldn't use formula. There was no compassion for my injuries, my experience or my baby's needs. It was disgusting. I was often left in tears after a midwife left the room. I am quite a shy person and a people

pleaser. I had just been through 9 months of torture and now this. It completely added to all the trauma. When we got home, we continued mixed feeding. I was sent home with a bunch of pain killers and clexane to be injected into my stomach daily by my husband. Like, that's totally normal.

Not one nurse/doctor questioned if we were okay and if we needed any help (particularly mentally, after all we'd been through) I had searing pain in my breasts by week5 postpartum. I was told by the community nurse visiting my home that once again, this is normal. It didn't seem normal. The next day, I was in hospital for the next 4 days with a fever and diagnosed mastitis. It was hell. It was so incredibly painful, plus I also had a fractured coccyx to deal with as well. This was my breaking point. From this point forward, I stopped breastfeeding and this was very helpful for my mental health.

By week 12, I was feeling physically better. I could finally sit in a chair quite normally (even if not for too long) this was progress. Once everything in my life quietened down, my mind got extremely loud. I was not coping. My anxiety was out of control. I was having panic attacks. My depression had gotten worse. There were days when I couldn't even get off the couch or out of bed. I had developed an intense fear of dying. One night, I passed a blot clot the size of golf ball at 3am and had a panic attack and assumed I was dying. I had my husband calling the hospital and hotlines for an answer. It was so scary. I have been going to therapy for the last 8 weeks. I have been completing eye-movement desensitisation reprocessing (EMDR) therapy with a therapist who specialises in perinatal mental health care.

This has been so helpful. I was brave enough to face myself and admit I needed help. I have a history of mental health (anxiety) and recognised the signs. But it made me wonder about other women and whether they get stuck in the trenches of depression and anxiety because they don't know they have it. It's scary. Sadly, I understand, that what happened to me was going to happen and it was no one's fault. However, I believe it was the actions of the midwives in particular which made it worse and caused an already traumatic experience to be even worse.