

Submission
No 436

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

I birthed my son L**** on Friday the 12th of March 2021 at [REDACTED] Hospital [REDACTED]. L**** was born via 'emergency c-section.' The official reason for the ECS was 'failure to progress.' L**** was born healthy, with no concerns noted for him. I have set out my recollection of L****' labour and birth to assist me, and any health care worker who may come to care for me, for this birth. It is important to me that anyone who has significant involvement in my care has some understanding of my previous experience.

My pregnancy with L**** was uncomplicated. I had no issues with blood pressure, the glucose test and there were no concerns in relation to growth. Concerns for low lying placenta were alleviated at a repeat scan at 32(ish) weeks. On or around 35-36 weeks I did the GBS swab at home. I did this test because I thought I 'had' to, however I now understand I could have declined it. I did not feel properly informed. I was told on or around 37 weeks that this swab was positive for GBS colonisation. I was given a brochure to take home to read. At this point in the pregnancy we had completed an active birth class through [REDACTED] and I had done a breastfeeding course through [REDACTED] via zoom, at the recommendation of the midwives. Having read through the risks, I knew I did not want to be induced, or have an epidural, and I desired to breastfeed. I wrote a birth plan to this effect.

At about 2:30AM on 12/3/21, my waters broke whilst sleeping. I had no previous signs of labour in the day or so before. It came as a big gush, and then consistent gushes, and then it trickled. I called the hospital, who advised that I come in due to the GBS status.

When I arrived at the hospital I asked the midwife if I could be re-tested for GBS, as I was aware it was a transient bacteria. I was told I could not. Contractions had not started. I felt well. Fetal monitoring raised no concern. I was later informed at a debrief clinic with an OB from [REDACTED] that I could have been re-tested.

I was hooked up with syntocinon and antibiotics at or around 7AM. I had cannulas in both hands/wrists, I remember I could not clench my fist as it hurt too much. I remember being told that I would meet my baby that day. I suppose I got swept up in this possibility. I do not recall agreeing to being induced, but rather being told that that was going to occur. I do not recall being informed of the risks of induction, in fact, I verily believe that I was not informed at all.

The following hours become a blur. I recall it started as period pain that was manageable. I then recall severe back pain, not relieved by the TENS machine or any of the active birth class positions. The continual fetal monitoring kept dropping out. I recall they changed the machine at least 3 times. I asked to eat, they said I could not. I asked to shower, they said I could not. They offered sterile water injections, I accepted. It was the worst pain – I screamed and begged them to stop. The midwife told me she didn't even get it in, and asked to do it again. I must have agreed. I remember screaming "No no no please stop" but she kept going. This is when I started to feel really out of control.

The hours past with contractions on top of each other. I must have had 4 – 5 cervical exams, with next to no progress (probably because I kept having fingers up my cervix but anyway). An epidural was offered, and I accepted, exhausted and depleted.

The epidural procedure was traumatic. It took 2 hours, with 8 attempts. I recall with most attempts, the feeling of lightning shooting down my legs. My legs and arms involuntarily jerking up. At one point I felt as if my neck was being sliced off. The anaesthetist consultant and registrar kept asking if I was a ballet dancer, or if I have scoliosis. They said there must be “something wrong with my anatomy.” When it finally worked, I felt great relief. There was no sign at that point that anything went wrong with the epidural, apart from a difficult insertion. They did not appear concerned that I had been feeling lightening bolt sensation or acute pain in my neck during the procedure. At no point was I told that they were having so much difficulty. I believe they should have completely stopped and re-assessed the suitability for the epidural. I was not of sound mind for it to continue, as I only found out later that it took 2 hours. My mum who was there at this point thought I had fallen asleep. I believe now that I might have passed out briefly, and no one really knew.

I think I was only given another 2 – 3 hours before the OB came in and said, “baby happy, but I think we do caesarean.” She had an eastern European accent, hence the way I have remembered her speaking this sentence - it was so abrupt. It was not a question but a direction. Exhausted, and depleted, I agreed. We were given no other option, so I thought that was my only option. At this point, I had not eaten in 24 hours as I was told I was not allowed. I was broken. I had failed. I did not feel supported to birth my baby vaginally. I maintain I was not given any other options.

The c-section itself was relatively smooth, or as smooth as major surgery can go, however I was shaking so much that I needed to be strapped down. I did not ever anticipate this, so this became quite traumatic for me. I only realised it affected me when at L****’ first Christmas, I experienced sudden flashbacks as I wrapped his present and heard the sound of the tape. I felt like I was back on the table.

When L**** came out, I remember feeling really dizzy. I think I was coming in and out of consciousness. When they brought me over, I remember trying hard to cry. Nothing was coming though, and I mostly just wanted to sleep. I think I just wanted to feel something.

There was an hour between him being born to me first holding him. I have no memory of this time and neither does my partner. I remember in recovery the midwife forced him on to my breast. It hurt, a lot. I felt sick. She commented that “no offence, but because you have small breasts you’re going to have a hard time feeding.” I suspected this, but had hoped otherwise. I have always been self conscious of my breasts, and this felt like a harsh comment to make at a vulnerable time. In my antenatal appointments I asked at every appointment for support prenatally but I was told I would just get the support after birth. I remember he stayed on for quite a while, but it did not feel like the beautiful moment I had hoped it to be.

I was treated with kindness by most of the midwives in the day or so after. The difficult part of this time was whenever there would be a midwife shift change, I would hear 1) that I had anxiety and 2) that I had failed to progress. I was diagnosed with an 'eating disorder not otherwise specified' when I was 17 years old. This as in the context of anxiety experienced following my parents separation, body image issues, and the HSC. I have experienced periods of increased anxiety in my life since, however most is contextual and has been alleviated by lifestyle changes or check in sessions with a psychologist. I am an anxious person, but I do not have anxiety. I experience anxiety as a trait, not an entire state of being. This felt really embarrassing and dehumanising. The comments around failing to progress would go on to reinforce my sense of failure into the post partum period (basically the entire first year).

At 3 day PP when I was about to be discharged (note at this point I still could not stand up straight and had difficulty feeding L****, basically sobbing at every time and dreading it) I began to feel unwell. I remember my head slumped forward and I could not pick it up. It was hard to open my eyes. A midwife took my BP, said it was high and that I would likely stay another night. It eventuated that I had developed postpartum pre-eclampsia, with blood tests showing my liver and kidney functioning was abnormal. I did not, however, respond to treatment, and I continued to feel extreme headache and neck pain.

Towards the end of day 3, suddenly I remember at least three doctors coming in and telling me to get flat on my back. They believed I had a dural puncture from the epidural insertion. When I was flat, I did notice sudden relief. What came over the next few days included being told that there was something wrong with me and that I was "unusual." I needed to be transferred to ██████████ Hospital for a MRI as ██████████ did not have a machine. At 5 days pp, I was bundled up into a patient transfer van with two other patients. They were men from the cancer ward who had reportedly had brain cancer. Their behaviour was odd and they made comments about my breasts. I remember looking at the window, seeing buildings and traffic lights, and wanting to die or at least wanting peace in some way. During the MRI, my milk then came through. I was soaked and ashamed. I looked at photos of L****, but did not long for him. I resented the experience to date and felt extreme hatred for my body. I wanted to go home.

The MRI came back with what appeared to be a pool of fluid on the base of my spine. The head anaesthesiologist said that an option to address the puncture was to do a blood patch. However, he said "if you were my wife, I would not recommend the blood patch." I'm not sure of any other reason. This comment was jarring, but I felt like I couldn't confront him. I was flat on my back, they were standing over me. How was I going to fight him on that one in my state? They suggested doing a nerve block through my nose, which they said was experimental but would be a less invasive option. I accepted, however upon reflection, this process severely disrupted my attachment to L****. I went away twice to do the procedure, which meant this was the third time I was away from him in his first week of life. I was not supported to bring him with me, which I certainly could have, as I was only lying in the recovery area. Instead, he stayed with my partner and screamed non stop. There was tension between the OBs and anaesthetists and the head OB told me that the anaesthetists were "dodgy mechanics." The anaesthetists, inclusive of the head of department, kept questioning

my profession as I was very “calm.” They even asked me if I was a lawyer. I’m not sure if they were trying to gage my mental health, or whether I would take legal action against them. I know now that my demeanour was like disassociation.

I would like to address the breastfeeding support briefly. Firstly, I never felt pressure to breastfeed, which I felt was appropriate given my circumstances. However, I really wanted to breastfeed, and so I did not feel supported to do so. The lactation consultant saw me approx. three times. On all these occasions she just came and put L**** on my boob, stayed for a minute or two, and then left. My nipples were bleeding and I felt pain during every feed. The midwives were more helpful in setting up the breast pump, but again, their support was very minimal and they seemed time poor. Because of my c section, I had limited mobility, and I believe in order to successfully initiate breastfeeding, would have needed support at literally every feed. This did not seem possible, and I felt like an inconvenience to the midwives, particularly as I was there for a week. I believe it was the lack of support that made me not pursue breastfeeding past the first week.

I now turn to my involvement with the neurology department. When I returned from the MRI, my partner mentioned that he had noticed me twitching. This was primarily concentrated to my legs and arms. It was like when you are just falling asleep and all the sudden you feel like you’re falling off a cliff – it was that stiff jerk motion. I became known to the neurology department who assessed no issues of concern but erred on the side of caution and did not recommend that I be discharged. I attempted to advocate for myself to the OBs, but they said it was out of their hands as they had cleared me from their end. In the end, a consultant came down and cleared me to go home, 7 days after birth, and see her as an outpatient. I had a repeat MRI at 6 weeks which showed a disc protrusion (not related and likely occurring after birth). At 8 week, I had an EEG which showed normal brain activity. When I continued to report symptoms 10 months later I was told I would be referred for a brain scan. The referral never came by email as it was meant to. I made a decision to not pursue it and disengage. I needed to leave this part of my life behind me and move on.

I continued to suffer high blood pressure and kidney pain up to 8 weeks post partum. I was slowly weaned off medication. My blood pressure is now normal.

I am pregnant currently and due to birth in or around January 2024. I am in the MGP at [REDACTED] and can already see the difference in antenatal care. I feel supported to have a VBAC and am actually excited. If there was a postpartum inquiry I would go more into that (intrusive thoughts, sleep deprivation, covid lockdown, lack of support).. but that is for another inquiry.

I hope that this inquiry brings to light the following:

- the impact of routine GBS screening in NSW given the correlation between GBS screening and risk of intervention (see Sara Wickham's research into this)
- how integral MGP care is in pregnancy
- how important it is to explain the risks of induction

- how important it is to give options, especially when there is time to do so
- handovers with midwives: the power of language in vulnerable times
- breastfeeding support must improve in hospitals for women who are wanting that support
- the c section rate in nsw is dire. something must be done. in 2021 40% of babies were born via c section which is way above the WHO recommendation. It is no way to start motherhood.
- debrief clinic should be offered to everyone with an OB independent of the birth.

Thank you for considering.