

Submission
No 437

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

I gave birth to my first child in February 2022 at the new [REDACTED] Hospital, via emergency caesarean at 41+6 days, after induction at 41+5 days.

I had a low risk, straightforward pregnancy, and I believe this contributed to the lack of continuity of care I received while pregnant. My GP didn't want to treat me after I had been referred to antenatal care, and I didn't see the same midwife for any of my appointments. I had to retell my information and story multiple times.

When I had my post-dates appointment around 41 weeks, after an attempted stretch and sweep, I was told I would have to be induced due to no dilation - it wasn't a discussion, I wasn't given alternative options, I was just told when to arrive at the hospital for my induction.

When I arrived, my partner and I didn't know what to expect, how long each intervention of the induction would last. I didn't know that I could have refused a morning induction in favour of an afternoon/night induction. Honestly, I learned more from Facebook mother-to-be groups than any of the medical professionals involved prior to giving birth.

They say intervention begets intervention. After a long day of induction, my waters broke at night and I laboured through the early morning. I think I had every pain management option you could have. However, in hindsight, I did not give informed consent for any of them. I was labouring okay with heatpacks and movement, until I was told to try to the shower. So I did. I was labouring fine in the shower, until the midwife told me she thought it was time to get out. And I did. I was managing okay with the gas, until the midwife told me it was time to try morphine. Which I did. Same with the water injection. Same with the epidural. I also didn't know that they would keep increasing the level of whatever drug they gave me via drip to keep my labour going. I was even happy labouring naked - but there are photos of me in a hospital gown. I have no memory at all of agreeing to wear that.

I didn't ask for any drugs, but when you are vulnerable, in pain, already confused about the induction and stressed and tired, when a professional tells you to do something in labour, you do it because you think you can trust them, you think they know best. But no-one asked me what I wanted. No-one offered me informed consent. As a first time parent, I didn't know better. And neither did my partner. He was doing his best to help me manage the pain, and some part of me knows the midwives were too, but it was their responsibility to make sure I understood what all these drugs were they were giving me and what impact it could have. I think they also partly didn't like having a woman screaming constantly. Well, hey, maybe don't be a midwife then.

My labour slowed significantly with the epidural. Around 3 hours before my child was born, an obstetrician performed a cervical check (again, I didn't know why, I just agreed because I thought that's what you do). They said I wasn't progressing quickly enough and would probably look at a caesarean soon. Why? I still don't know why not progressing quickly enough was reason for a caesarean. Most of my labour memories are flashes, I believe due to how many drugs they gave me.

When the second cervical check was performed around 11am (14 or so hours after my water broke, 26 or so hours after the induction was started), my child's heart rate dropped and wasn't recovering, so I was rushed off for the emergency caesarean. They had me sign a consent form as I was hysterically sobbing and being wheeled down the hall - who on earth knows what I was signing at that point.

My child was born healthy, and is still a healthy toddler now. I have done birth trauma counselling, I have done a doula debrief, I have shared many more details of my birth story with people and tried to heal as much as I can. But the trauma of not being awake for my child's birth is something I will never heal from. The thought of missing their first hours while I was stitched up and sleeping in recovery will never not make me cry and my heart ache terribly.

I still recall the feeling of someone pushing the anesthetic sleeping gas on my face and me asking what they were doing. Next moment, I woke up alone in recovery and asked to see my child and partner. I then had to listen to a nurse and doctor having a screaming match because of patient care ratios. I had my colostrum squeezed out of my nipples because the nurses thought I shouldn't be given a chance to try breastfeeding straight away (no consent or discussion, again I was just told that's what was happening). We had family photos taken, because who wouldn't want photos? Me, because it was the first time I was meeting my child and within minutes I had a camera in our faces to capture the meeting. No consent or thought given that I just wanted to finally hold my child.

While most of the midwives were lovely and supportive in the days that followed, there were also a few who were nasty and condescending, and I have already made complaints to the hospital about these staff. They told me it was partly my fault for the way my labour unfolded due to not being active during pregnancy (despite not asking me what my activity levels were nor there being research to support this sadly prevalent view). They told me I should be moving more, despite the horrendous pain of the incision. They told me I should have found out the sex before birth, because its boring not knowing, despite it being none of their business. They told me I shouldn't have had the induction, because lots of babies are born healthily after 42 weeks. They told me to use nipple shields and to try formula, because my nipples were flat and I was struggling to feed, despite the fact I have multiple photos and messages I sent in those early hazy days of successfully breastfeeding.

I would love for all pregnant people to have consistent care, to see the same professionals and feel like someone knows your story without having to pay in the private system. I would love for discussions of induction and interventions to become part of the conversations in antenatal care, so you are prepared for whatever may happen. I would love for everyone involved in maternity care to remember that pregnant people can labour loudly, can labour naked, can labour for a long time and in pain without it having to be "sanitised" or "fixed", to respect the magic and support people instead of trying to wrap it up quickly.

Please also note, I would not like to provide in-person testimony.