

Submission
No 444

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

Dear Chair,

I am a NSW resident and birthing mother and I would like to make a submission to your inquiry on birth trauma. I have chosen to make this submission public but with my name withheld because I hope that sharing my experience will help to create change for other mothers and families. I am generally a private person so I've chosen not to share the name of the specific hospital or the gender of my child to provide them with some level of privacy. Just writing this submission has been a difficult experience for me, recalling and trying to organise the events in a way which will be I hope will be clear has brought up very distressing feelings. My stomach has been churning and I feel heavy as I revisit the details.

I experienced birth trauma in a Sydney private hospital in 2021 as a result of a lack of informed consent at multiple points before, during and after my birth experience, at times disrespectful treatment, and a lack of staffing. The trauma I experienced was not the result of one practitioner, but seemed to be an organisational problem across many staff members.

I have an autoimmune disease and wanted to receive some continuity of care so chose to see an obstetrician and birth at a private hospital. My local public hospital will only accept patients with low risk pregnancies to the group midwifery practice which is the other way to receive a level of continuity of care in my area. I was advised not to see a physio or lactation consultant prior to birth, not to have a scan to see how big my baby was, and not to pay for any classes outside of the two hours on zoom the hospital offered - on the basis these things were not necessary and a waste of money. Our obstetrician was aware we were in our twenties and not in high paying jobs so I think he was with good intention trying to spare us unnecessary cost. I relied completely on his advice. Post birth now, I think all of those things may have improved my experience, and I would have been able and willing for pay for any of them had I been told they might have benefit to me.

At many times during my hospital admission I felt dismissed and afraid. I was nervous about having a big baby and asked my obstetrician if an induction was the right path and was simply told 'yes'. At the hospital I was asked by a nurse to undress so the gel could be applied to my cervix to begin the induction process - I looked around for a curtain to undress behind or a sheet to lay over me but there was nothing. I didn't want to make a fuss and got on with it. Later on my obstetrician came to visit and do a vaginal examination to see how I had progressed. Without my consent or any warning he used his fingers to rupture my membranes. I was surprised and it was very painful. Later on another check I was experiencing very strong and painful contractions, and was trying to communicate I wanted to exam to stop, but was told 'the gas [I had been told to use for pain relief] is making you scared, stop breathing the gas'. When the examination was over the obstetrician said 'I just turned your baby' and I realised why it had taken so long and been so painful. Again I hadn't been given any notice or explanation, or opportunity to consent. Later I was in terrible pain, absolutely exhausted, frightened, to the point where I was struggling to hear people talking. I managed to ask (beg) to see my doctor. I later found out the midwives had taken two hours to even tell my doctor I wanted to see him. My doctor came in saying 'you're either having the baby or

an epidural'. He examined me again and found my baby hadn't descended enough so I had an epidural. When it came time for the birth the monitor was showing there was no down time between contractions. The midwives and doctor were struggling to help me know the best time to push. My doctor casually asked me if I had been a big baby or had a family history of big babies. I had brought up big babies almost every appointment of my antenatal care - I was a large baby, my husband was a large baby, and I have a strong family history of women having large babies, babies experiencing birth injuries, and even maternal death due to babies getting stuck. I was shocked he didn't remember. It was my number one reason for seeking obstetric care - having a person who would know my history and be able to plan accordingly. My baby ended up having a failed vacuum extraction and being delivered by forceps, I had 3rd degree tearing and my baby had a head injury which result in my baby being taken from me to stay in special care for a night. It was a very tense, difficult and quiet instrumental delivery and both my husband and I (silently) feared our baby was going to be born dead or seriously injured. The whole team seemed desperate for it to work, and they had to keep cutting a longer and longer episiotomy before delivering our baby. The epidural was wearing off by the time I was receiving stitches for my cutting and tearing, but when I said I could feel the stitches I was told 'I'll get some local anaesthetic brought up here but I'll just keep going until it arrives'. It was so painful but I kept quiet wanting to hold my new baby. It took about 45 minutes to complete the stitches, and I was told by my obstetrician it could have been done in a quarter of that time in theatre with an assistant, but he wanted to keep me and baby together - it would have been nice to make that choice myself and understand why I was going through that pain.

After I had been stitched up I was told by my obstetrician he would leave a note for some strong pain relief to be available during the night. We were left along in the delivery suite wondering what to do next. Just when we were thinking maybe we were meant to sleep there, a nurse came in to move us to a room. I couldn't walk and had a catheter, I painfully manoeuvred into a wheel chair and the nurse asked if I 'had something to wear so you don't frighten the other patients'. Later that night I asked for pain relief and was given Paracetamol, the nurse on duty was confused by my notes and by the comparability of pain relief options with the autoimmune disease I suffer from, so I was not given Ibuprofen let alone anything stronger for my pain. Days later I was told my the obstetrician ibuprofen was essential for the recovery and swelling and tissue damage I had sustained and that I should have been given it from the start and needed to begin taking it.

The paediatrician who checked my baby after birth said 'don't google it' referring to the birth injury, but told me barely anything about my babies condition. Later I found out the type of injury my baby received to the head can be life threatening or result in serious permanent disability. I wished I had been allowed to stay by my baby's bedside the whole time, especially as those may have been the only hours or days we had together had things turned out for the worst. I had a catheter and couldn't walk to the nursery. I lay in bloody sheets all night. I lay awake waiting for my baby to be brought to me so I could breastfeed. In the morning I asked to go see my baby, and was able to go to my baby once my catheter had been removed. Having been assured my baby would be brought to me if awake, I was shocked and upset to see my baby had been given a dummy. This is not recommended for establishing breastfeeding, I did not consent to the use of a dummy, and why would my child have been

given a dummy if my baby had not been awake (and I should have been brought to my baby or my baby to me). A nurse in special care said 'you don't mind if we give [baby] formula here do you' to which I nervously replied I did mind and had hoped to breastfeed. Staff were too busy to show me how to use the breast pumps available until several days into the stay. They were also too busy to give us an introduction to the ward so we weren't told where ice was to put on my wounds, where fresh pads were, or where fresh nappies etc were kept.

I was left with bruising on one of my breasts as a result of a nurse trying to help me to express milk for my baby. I saw a mixture of different hygiene practices relating to my baby (we were still in covid lockdown) and while some nurses would wear gloves to put a finger in her mouth, another put a finger still dripping with hand sanitiser in, and others put in ungloved uncleaned fingers. At one point a nurse took my child and fed my baby formula without my informed consent, and I received so much conflicting feeding advice from the two lactation consultants, various nurses and the paediatrician. My husband overheard nurses in special care discussing another baby who was meant to be breastfed, but who had also been fed formula anyway. My milk didn't come in properly for more than 5 days, until I was back home and feeling safe.

Our child's first bath was very upsetting for us all as a result of the head injury. In retrospect I realise the bath was unimportant and it could have been left a few more days to allow for some healing, however we were not given a choice. Our child also received ultrasounds to the head, the first of which we were not present for and did not consent to, even though we had asked to be present for any medical procedures, and the second of which we later found out had been completed incorrectly. I was told I would be able to debrief from my birth with the team present at the labour but I never had that opportunity despite spending four nights in the hospital.

During the hospital stay, I continued to feel unsafe and scared staff would think I was a bad mum if I questioned them. I waited anxious each day to see who was rostered on, hoping for someone to treat me with kindness. We were required to get our baby up at 2am to complete a weigh in the morning before leaving, which seems ridiculous now that that couldn't have wait till the actual morning or until our baby woke naturally. As our child was slightly less than 90% of birth weight, we were asked to return to the hospital a week later for a reweigh, which we did, however a few days after that I received a follow up call saying they had no record we had attended. I assured them we had attended, providing the date and time and weight. Later I paid over \$100 to receive a full copy of the records the hospital held, and the note of the reweigh visit was there, as well as a record of the later phone call saying 'mother claimed' to have attended but there was no record to prove it. I was relieved to see in writing that there was evidence staff were distrustful of me, and that I wasn't just crazy. I could also see in my records that no one had ticked the box indicating someone had explained how to post natal ward worked - we felt like everyone was annoyed we didn't know where things were, but we really had never been told, and that was on the record for anyone to see. Part of me wishes I had spoken up more about my baby's care while we were in hospital, but the other part of me feels like by being quiet and compliant I kept us both safe and got us home together, despite the trauma we both experienced. I was so relieved when we were finally able to leave to hospital, and am sad to know others experienced far worse.

I have continued to have frequent intrusive thoughts about the pain and the fear of the death of myself and my baby I experienced during the birth for almost two years. I feel angry and upset thinking about how my child could have died in those days after birth while the extent of the head injury was still unknown. I am physically still recovering from my injuries, and they impact my ability to exercise and do daily tasks - there has also been a financial cost as I have sought the assistance of a Physio. My baby's first weeks were marked by the pain of the head injury - unlike other sleepy snuggly newborns my precious child winced to be held, cried with pain frequently, woke often and we struggled to establish breastfeeding. By the grace of God my child is now healthy, and we were able to exclusively breastfeed for the first six months as recommended by the world health organisation, and continue into toddlerhood. My child still had a visible scar to the face, is very sensitive to having touch on the head, and is sensitive and alert to separations - no one can know how the early traumatic days have impacted on the development of my child.

I feel extremely anxious about another pregnancy and birth, the fear and powerless I felt my first time was overwhelming. I did everything I could to have a positive and safe birth, but it seems no one is offering that as standard, no matter what you pay or where you go. I love my child so much and want to have another baby, but am honestly afraid of dying next time and leaving my child motherless. I have many sleepless nights wondering if I should just be grateful for surviving and have no more children. I thought I had chosen a model of care where I would have some continuity, where my family history and my autoimmune disease would be taken into account, and where I would be safe, but instead both me and my child suffered serious injury, I felt terrible fear of losing my life and that of my child, and I was repeatedly not offered choices or information which could have made the process less frightening and less traumatic. I would have been happy to have a Caesarian delivery if one had been offered at any point - my number one priority had always been a safe delivery for my child and myself, and I had made that clear from my very first appointment. I think improved culture around consent, better record keeping, and higher levels of staffing would have improved my birth experience. I feel like I know so much more now, but still do not feel confident to advocate for myself next time (should there be one) because ultimately my life, my body, and my child are in the hands of the medical team and I would never want to risk them being rough or uncaring because they became annoyed by a request or a question - it was already a bad enough experience as a polite and compliant patient. The power imbalance is so large between expecting / new mother and hospital team, a solution needs to go far beyond better education for parents to be.

Thank you to the committee for considering my submission, and I hope this inquiry will result in my other mothers and children avoiding the trauma we experienced, and also in improving the work environment for staff who are under pressure from unreasonable numbers of patients to care for and poor record keeping systems. Some of the nurses on the postnatal ward were very kind and it must have been hard for them too to work in that environment.