

Submission
No 523

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

I gave birth to my first child at [REDACTED] hospital in December 2019.

It was, for the most part, a positive experience despite being a long labour and ending in a vacuum assisted birth. I appreciated the continuity of care and the trust I had with my caseload midwife, and I also appreciated the way the doctor who performed the episiotomy and vacuum talked me through what was happening respectfully, and also came to debrief with me the next day. She especially assured me it wasn't my fault, my body hadn't failed in any way.

There were two moments, however, that have stayed with me as being greatly distressing.

The first was when, after a golden hour of holding my brand new baby on my chest, feeding, resting, in awe of this new life, the new midwife on shift suggested I take a shower. I'd lost a bit of blood so she told my husband to help me shower, and meanwhile she'd simply wrap up our baby and perform a few more checks. We were in the ensuite for maybe five minutes and when we came out my baby was gone. Gone. She'd been taken to the NICU. Of course I am grateful for medical staff who were determined to give the best care to my baby, and at the same time I cannot believe they didn't so much as knock on the door to let us know what was happening to our one hour old baby. We had always said that if our baby had to go to the NICU, my husband would go with her. The fact that she was taken without our knowledge still deeply upsets me three years later. Newborn babies, even and especially sick ones, are supposed to be with their mums and dads.

The second moment occurred a short while later when I was finally reunited with my baby in the NICU. A nurse handed me a short consent form asking things like whether I was happy for them to give the baby a dummy. I wasn't, but they already had and continued to do so. More significantly, it asked my consent for them to give formula. This was a generic question, as in our case my baby was nil by mouth for most of the 24 hours she spent in the NICU. I said no to formula as I intended to breastfeed and I knew from the education and preparation I'd done that these first few days were important in establishing my milk supply. Upon handing back the form the nurse looked at my responses and then looked back at me. I will never forget this exchange. He said to me, "Oh but what if you can't?" I asked what he meant by that. He said "What if you can't breastfeed, what if you're not here?" I explained that I would either be here holding my baby or just upstairs on the maternity ward. They could call me and help me come down to feed at any time day or night. I would also be expressing every 2 hours and would send down colostrum. Again he said to me "Yeah but what if you can't?" His tone was aggressive. I had given birth maybe 2 hours before this. I'd been in labour for over a week. I was exhausted, light headed from blood loss, and could barely walk thanks to an episiotomy. My baby had been taken from me to the NICU without my knowledge. I say this to explain how vulnerable I was at this time. And now, my decision to refuse formula was being interrogated. My ability to breastfeed was being questioned before I'd even had a chance. The form asked whether or not I consented. I said no. The nurse was pushing me to change my position. I refused. I was and still am hurt by this conversation.

What both these issues communicated to me was that as a mum, I didn't matter and I probably wouldn't be capable enough. And that was the resounding message I got on day 1 as a mum.

So many women I know have experienced birth trauma, and many of their stories are far more horrific than the lack of respect I experienced in these two instances. I hope they have the courage to share so that this inquiry can hear their stories and make changes. I share my story because it doesn't have to be that way. And because sometimes it doesn't take much to fix. It can be so simple. A knock at the door to say 'Excuse me, we need to take your baby to NICU now' or simply saying 'ok' as I handed back the consent form.

The next day, when the NICU doctors finally said she was allowed to feed, I sat in the NICU and tried to breastfeed. It wasn't easy (and wouldn't be for months) but I was prepared to learn. A different nurse on shift looked over and said to me amazed, "Is this your first baby? You're doing so well, you look so confident." And that is how you should talk to new mums. Respectfully. With encouragement and support. That's how mums and babies get the best start.