

Submission  
No 536

## INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

**Name:** Name suppressed

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Partially  
Confidential

I gave birth in 2019, in the birth centre where I had given birth to my son a few years earlier. I had incredible continuity of midwifery care, was well educated about physiological birth and had prepared my body well. I experienced a spontaneous labour and my daughter was born just over 3 hours later. It was an incredibly empowering experience, supported by amazing midwives. Unfortunately, I experienced quite an extreme post partum haemorrhage. Even though I had my placenta manually removed by a hand deep inside me, that Doctor was respectful, kind and took time to explain everything to me. When the bleeding continued I had surgery to install a baccary balloon and meters of wadding to hold it in place and stop the bleeding. I woke up in ICU. That night I was told that because my husband had to go home to care for our toddler, my baby would have to go to special care, without me.

My baby was 4.22kg, she was perfectly healthy and she would have been at home if I wasn't in the ICU. My baby was not sick, she did not need any special care and she certainly did not need to be taken away from me to take a precious space in the special care nursery. There was no way I was going to be separated from my baby so I told them I would leave hospital if they took her away. My incredible student midwife was also a close friend so she slept beside me on a chair, convincing the ICU doctors that it was safe to leave my baby with me instead of taking her away. My baby did not leave my chest. Breastfeeding is of high importance to me and I knew that a PPH could seriously affect my milk supply. Any time spent away from my baby would jeopardize my breastfeeding relationship even further.

During my stay in ICU Doctors would continually visit and try to coerce me into doing things I didn't want to do. Even though I specifically asked not to be given laxatives, I was consistently asked every few hours, stating a multitude of different reasons as to why it was the option I must have. Eventually I said firmly, please do not ask me again. My heart rate was a little high on day 2, and I was told that I couldn't move out of ICU until it lowered. For some reason no one thought there was any correlation between people threatening to take my baby away and my heart rate being raised. It was so so shocking to me (and it still is!) that the medical professionals who care for women at THE most vulnerable time of their life, have NO knowledge of the most sacred human dyad on the planet: that of mother and baby.

There is huge amounts of research that provides a very clear picture of what affects a woman's relationship with her baby and their breastfeeding relationship, plus recovery from PPH. Simple skin to skin should be an absolute minimum and anyone who works with women after birth should have proper knowledge of these things. I asked when the baccary balloon should come out, after being told it should stay on for 12 hours. More than 24 hours later I was told a dr would come to take it out soon. I asked whether it would be painful, the nurse told me 'no it's not usually painful at all, they do it very gently and slowly to ensure you don't have another haemorrhage as the pressure is taken off the uterus'. I relaxed, thinking it would be okay and at least help get me closer to home to my toddler.

The OB arrived, quickly moved my legs into position and proceeded to pull the wadding (numerous meters of it) out of my vagina, quickly and without any care at all. I was writhing in pain, flopping around on the bed I had not yet moved from in almost 2 full days, the nurse

held my arm and was visibly traumatized herself. She told me afterward that it isn't usually like that. I asked why he was rushing so much and she said 'he has an emergency Caesarian to attend'. I still can not comprehend that my life was changed forever because an OB was rushing to do something to me (that could have led to another life threatening PPH) because he was running to another emergency.

It really struck me that every time a Doctor would come to my bedside- they would just start talking about my body, ignoring the brand new, beautiful healthy baby that was lying on my chest. I had just given birth, what a miracle! Those precious moments of being congratulated and celebrating the newborn bliss and pride of birthing your baby should not be taken away. I reminded them all that it was my [REDACTED] birthday! I just gave birth! That night I went to the postnatal ward. When I arrived, I heard the nurses standing outside my door discussing my file before a shift change. It was noted that I was not accepting all the things suggested to me and it was made to sound like I was a trouble maker. This was almost midnight the day after my daughter was born at 6.23 am the day before.

I still had not moved from my bed or been offered a shower or even a sponge bath- even though I was literally covered in blood, at least half my body had dried blood all over it. Around midnight I asked a nurse to help me shower- she was absolutely shocked that I had gone almost 48 hours without even being offered a sponge bath or shower. I felt revolting. She came back an hour or so later and told me she had to be quick, but helped me to have a shower and it felt so good. Later that night an incredible midwife offered me a back massage, telling me I was a Queen for all I had been through. That was the kindest part of my whole stay. After my shower, in the middle of the night, the OB/gyn that had removed my placenta and done my surgery came to check in on me after his shift.

He listened with the most incredible compassion, kindness and empathy. He took me through what had happened and his ideas about why. He let me know that my recovery might be hard, because I had lost a huge amount of blood. I will never ever forget his face or how much love he showed me in that time. Eventually I was allowed to go home, however on day 9 postpartum I had a secondary PPH/ in which blood is ran down my legs and filled my shoes. I went in an ambulance (where they coerced me to have antiausea medication so I didn't vomit in the ambulance) to the hospital- so I was separated from my daughter again, though only for awhile because I asked the ambulance assistant to go find my husband who was waiting in ED. I spent the day waiting around with blood covering my pants and legs. Eventually my beautiful birth centre midwife came down and gave me a shower. I will never forget the compassion with which she showered me that day.

The OB on duty came in later and told me she needed to use a speculum to look up inside my uterus. I reminded her that 9 days earlier I had had multiple peoples hands inside my vagina and up inside my uterus at one time, about the Baccary balloon etc. She insisted that she needed to do that to see what caused the second bleed. I said I wanted gas for pain relief and she said it wasn't possible because emergency didn't have any gas. I said I'm not doing the procedure without pain relief. My body was already in so much pain and so so sore. Aside

from having just given birth to a 4.22kg baby with a 37cm head, I had all the interventions too. Eventually she realised I was serious and my midwife offered to go grab the gas from the birth centre. Even with the gas the internal was an incredibly painful experience. I can only imagine how traumatizing it would have been without any pain relief. I spent the next 5 days on the postnatal ward again- I had 7 rounds of antibiotics in the first 2 weeks of my daughters life. One day they wanted to change the antibiotics over but it was causing me extreme pain in the cannula site.

I kept pushing through- tears rolling down my cheeks- because they kept saying how necessary it was that I have this specific medicine. Eventually a midwife I know from the birth centre came by and held my hand and reminded me that I could say no and ask them to stop. So I did. This part really shook me because I am a strong woman, a firm advocate for myself, and yet still I needed reminding that I could say no. There was a beautiful midwife called [REDACTED] who held and cuddled my daughter so I could use the toilet without having to leave her cry. He showed compassion that I desperately needed. Another nurse, [REDACTED] showered me with care and utmost love when I needed it most also. After I left hospital I felt okay for a few months and then it hit me. Flashbacks of the time in ICU- doctors threatening to take my baby away from me, the OB pulling the baccary balloon and wadding from inside me without pain medication, the cannula hurting me, being alone for hours every day and being questioned about so many of the decisions I had made, even though they were made from an informed place. I continually wonder what would have happened at that point if I had been suicidal. Interestingly that information was never provided by doctors or OB at any point, though it was clear that they expected me to follow their instructions without so much as even one question. I was diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder.

Following that were the darkest few years of my life. We were in COVID lockdowns, I was alone with a baby and a toddler for most of every day, my family interstate. I rang the hospital and requested to see a social worker through them- a service they offer- and was told they because my residential address doesn't meet the criteria I was not able to see someone. It is now almost 4 years (next week) since my beautiful girl was born. Her moment of birth remains one of the proudest moments of my life. I will never, ever forget how I was treated in the most sacred time of my life, immediate postpartum, by the very medical professionals who had just saved my physical life. There are many more glimmers of sunshine and hope than there were, but PTSD is still a very, very real and challenging part of my life.

It has forever affected my children's childhoods, my marriage, all of my relationships and my entire life. I wonder- if I was someone who could not speak English, who had no support at home, who had no knowledge of birth or breastfeeding, or who was unable to advocate for myself- how much worse could it have been? Every birthing person deserves to feel safe in their body and their soul during every single moment of their pregnancy, their birth and their postpartum experience. Our maternity system is in absolute despair. We need a proper overhaul, where women and birthing people are asked and listened to. Right now the face of our country's future is being changed permanently by the birth trauma of women and the birthing experience of their babies (yes, there is research around the affects of that too!). It's not good enough. We deserve better. I deserve better. My daughter deserves better.