

Submission
No 473

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

Date Received: 10 August 2023

Partially
Confidential

I went into labour at 41 weeks pregnant in March 2023. As a part of the midwifery program I felt safe and well cared for by my midwife who had been seeing through my first pregnancy. She was incredible and supportive for the initial seventeen hours that I had been labouring. I was encouraged to have an epidural to progress my labour as I was quickly becoming exhausted. Unfortunately she had extended her shift as long as she could and she needed to go home. She was replaced by another young midwife in the program who was also amazing.

Another ten hours later I was ready to start pushing. 30 minutes into pushing she screamed at me to stop. She asked my husband to come and look at a length of tissue that was present in my vagina, that had not been seen in previous transvaginal scans and vaginal exams. She went to consult with the obstetrician, with my husband and I left extremely confused, and my body bearing down. The epidural started to wear off during this time. The obstetrician came into the room and examined me. She had an extremely thick accent which unfortunately as I was quite exhausted and had been passing in and out of sleep, I was quite confused and did not understand fully what she was saying so relied on my husband. She said something hurriedly and then yelled at the midwife to give her a scalpel. I began to protest and asked her to explain what was going on and what the problem was, she was about to cut inside my vagina when my husband yelled at her to stop. The midwife was raising an issue regarding bleeding and all I could hear was "she could bleed out".

She retracted and became seemingly annoyed and said back to him "I either do this, or your baby dies, what do you want?". The midwife attempted to regain control of the situation and explained to me that I had a rare thing called a vaginal septum, and that if I continued to push, my babies head would tear it, which could lead to a significant hemorrhage.

At that time my son's heart rate dropped dramatically and the situation became an emergency. I did not have time to consent to the procedure before clamps were placed inside of me and the septum was cut. It did not cause a hemorrhage thankfully however the emergency button was pushed and around 7 midwives and doctors ran into the room. Each was shouting or demanding something from another and of me. I was being screamed at by the Obstetrician to push and being told by my main midwife not to and to listen to her alone. It felt extremely chaotic and felt like not a single person had any control of the situation. I was being told if I didn't push my son was going to die because his heartrate was falling, but then being told not to push because I was going to tear and they wanted to coach me through it slowly. The midwife said to the Obstetrician "we don't need any more hands in here, there's too many" as she tried to get control of the room again however the Obstetrician was literally stretching me. A pediatric doctor came running into the room and stood to the side staring at me for the entirety of the ordeal, which sent me into a huge panic thinking I was hurting my baby. The OB yelled that I needed an episiotomy, something I was extremely against in my birth preferences. The Midwife told her this and she proceeded to grab a scalpel and started setting up for the episiotomy. I said over and over again that I did not want one, and that I wanted to push. The midwife told me that my son's heartbeat was getting low. My husband had to ask her how long could I push for before there was no way for me to escape the episiotomy however during that time I became frustrated with the lack of control and the forcefulness of the OB that I began pushing on my own.

I literally had five midwives and the OB begin literally yelling and screaming at me whilst surrounding my bed that I blacked out a lot of it and tried to just focus on what my husband was saying. My son was born and placed on my chest however was not breathing. He was ripped from my arms and taken over the pediatric doctor. I couldn't see him and had no idea what was going on. I was asking anyone in the room to answer my questions and tell me what was happening to him but no one responded for two or so minutes. It was horrific to catch glimpses of my newborn son being flung around by the doctor who I now realise was trying to get him to breathe but didn't have that understanding at the time, after 27 hours and pure exhaustion I registered it as my dead son. My midwife eventually explained to me that they were working on him to get him breathing, however I had a significant tear. Another midwife then came to my side and injected me to birth the placenta. This was not something I had consented to at the time. I then looked down between my legs in the stirrups and saw the OB who was tugging on the chord, seemingly trying to get the placenta out. I then began to black out, and came to find out I was experiencing a huge postpartum hemorrhage and just before I passed out completely I heard my son cry. Once I came to, my son was brought back to me.

A further issue experienced related to breastfeeding support. The second night in hospital was so horrific for my husband and I. My son had been cluster feeding all day and night and I was exhausted. I had not been told about

the cluster feeding so was not aware that this was a normal process. If I had of known that I think mentally I would have been prepared to continue. We requested assistance from the midwife on duty in the maternity suite that night. My son was screaming due to hunger and I was having what can only be described as a full blown mental breakdown, hysterically crying. The midwife came into the room and shouted at my husband, at 3am, that of course my son would keep needing to feed because he could smell me and he needed to get out. I immediately protested as I did not want to be separated from them, I just wanted some help with the breastfeeding. She all but shoved my husband who was holding our newborn son out of the room. I got on the bed and continued crying, which continued to escalate as I could hear my son hysterically crying out in the parents room over the white noise playing. I cried myself asleep and was not aware of what was happening outside with my husband and son. My husband was told by one midwife that if they gave a bottle of formula our son may settle which would give me a break. My husband felt so guilty that I was in so much pain so he consented. That midwife was not who brought him the bottle. He had to sign a horribly condescending consent form that said "I am aware that I am consenting to my child being given formula against health advice", and things like "against hospital policy", "breastfeeding is best". During this my son was escalating, the midwife grabbed him off my husband and began to swaddle him, despite him already being swaddled. He was handed the bottle and left on his own in an empty room. Our son was still hysterical whilst he was trying to calm him so he could take the bottle, when the kinder midwife came, unswaddled our son and settled him. He was given a bottle of formula, despite my husband not being given any advice or assistance as to this and coming to also consult with me.

The next day, my husband and I felt as if word had been passed around the midwives that we were these evil parents who had given a bottle of formula. We couldn't wait to go home.

In the aftermath of birth and early days of postpartum, I began to fall into a deep depressive state. I couldn't look at nor hold my son other than to breastfeed. Every time I fed I would hysterically cry. I felt that my birth had gone so horribly and completely unexpectedly, that I was having trouble processing everything that happened, coupled with being an exhausted new mother. I developed postpartum depression and anxiety, and later was diagnosed with PTSD surrounding the birth trauma I experienced. I felt that I had failed to have the "perfect" birth, and because of that I wasn't the "perfect" mother, which meant I was going to mess something up with my son, so couldn't hold him, or even change his nappy, despite my great love for him.

I have experienced deep depressive episodes and flashbacks of my birth, and have had to continue to follow up on care for the procedure to remove the septum which has left me with pelvic floor issues. I truly believe that my birthing experience would have been more positive with more clear and empathetic communication and support. Since the birth of my son I have been asked whether a second child will be considered, which was always the plan before my experience. It is now something that I hesitate to even think about because it brings a panic attack almost every time I let myself think about it.

Birth should be a beautiful and empowering experience, and whilst it can't always be so, we deserve better care and support.