

Submission  
No 538

## INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

**Name:** Name suppressed

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Partially  
Confidential

In 2003, at the age of 25, I went into labour with my first baby. I felt as ready as I could be- I had done birth classes, read books, and selected our local [REDACTED] hospital for my birth, as they had a birth centre and midwife-led care. I was relieved to know that if anything happened, the hospital was just next door.

After labouring at home for seven hours, I presented to the birth centre with my two birth support people- my partner, and a friend. It is worth noting that none of us knew much about birth (beyond what were taught in those classes), nor had we ever attended a birth. This is the sliding doors moment for me in this traumatic period, and I firmly believe if I had attended the hospital with an experienced doula to advocate for my needs, or my own dedicated midwife, or had decided on a home birth, the rest of this story would not have played out.

It immediately became apparent upon arriving at the birth centre that chaos was afoot, and the centre was hopelessly understaffed that night. We had been told at our orientation tour there would be a midwife on shift for each labouring mother, but there were three of us well into active labour that night and only one midwife on duty. What we later discovered was that the other two women were birthing at the same time, and this poor midwife was running between them, trying to birth two babies in separate rooms alone. I do not blame her for what happened next, as I believe the system let her down as much as it did me.

Due to the staffing shortage, we were left alone for most of the night in our birthing suite. As the hours dragged on, I was in more and more excruciating pain in my spine, and I was becoming desperate for reassurance and some relief. When the frazzled midwife did occasionally appear, she was incredibly short with me- she was snappy, rolled her eyes at me writhing around, and offered no helpful or kind solutions. She failed to pick up that my baby was posterior, which was creating the spinal pain. It was apparent that she had other things to be doing, and my "failing to progress" labour was hindering her doing them. I felt incredibly alone and scared.

At one point, after another painful internal exam, I was told I was "9.5cm dilated, so you might as well start pushing whenever you want to". I was then left alone again, not sure what that even meant. I tried to have a push but it was agonising.

Eventually, after twelve hours in the birth centre, I started begging for an epidural. The midwife made it clear she thought this was a bad idea, and that I was somehow failing by turning away from a natural birth. I felt completely overwhelmed and disempowered when I heard her call next door and tell the maternity ward, "yes, of course I've tried to talk her out of it, but she won't listen to me." In agonising pain, I was loaded into a wheelchair, and pushed next door. When a contraction came on, and I fell forward out of the wheelchair onto my hands and knees in the hospital foyer, I could literally hear her sighing in exasperation over my moaning.

Arriving in the maternity ward after planning a natural, drug-free birth was depressing and terrifying. As soon as I had the epidural, the relief was immediate, but I also started to throw up repeatedly. There were no vomit bags in the room, so I ended up vomiting into the empty plastic baby cradle next to me, which was mortifying. I was told that my labour was failing to progress because my baby was posterior and now stuck, possibly from trying to push (the obstetrician seemed shocked this wasn't picked up earlier), and a c-section was recommended. I burst into tears at this thought, and the obstetrician relented- he would give me two hours for my baby to descend, and after that I would be whisked to theatre. I had no choice in the matter.

After two hours, I had no sensations at all but was told to start pushing. After a period of time, I was told the baby was stuck again, and would need to be removed with a ventrose. I was not asked permission. Eventually, my baby was born, and whisked away for checking and oxygen. She was then brought to me, and laid on my chest. I was absolutely shattered. At this point I asked if there was any tearing, and I was told "there is a little bit of tearing, you just need a few stitches but don't you worry about that, we'll take care of it in theatre shortly". I remember feeling like something was being kept from me, and wondered why they were talking to me like a small child, but I was too exhausted and traumatised to speak up.

My daughter was then given to her Dad, and I was wheeled out.

Then the real horror began.

I was taken to theatre and told that because I had already had an epidural, I didn't need a general anaesthetic- they'd just top up the epidural again. I was then asked if it was okay for a few student doctors to observe. The next thing I know, I am lying on a bed in an operating theatre with my legs in stirrups, with two obstetricians and about 8-10 students of my age (both men and women) standing at the foot of my bed staring at my vagina. I could literally see on their faces that something was horribly wrong, and horribly fascinating for them all. Then I passed wind, and the doctor said, "Well, she's obviously relaxed" and they all laughed at me. Next, the head obstetrician began coaching the more junior obstetrician on how to stitch me. "That stitch is good. No, those ones aren't tight enough, take those out and start again". No one had told me what had happened, but it became obvious from listening that this was not simply a few stitches. Eventually, I passed out.

Some time later I woke up. I was still on the trolley, but I was now alone and in a hallway full of other empty trolley beds. No one was around, and I was desperate for water and to know where my baby was. I started yelling out and eventually a nurse found me. She seemed shocked I was in the hallway alone, and couldn't seem to understand why I wasn't in recovery. She kept asking "But why are you here!". I begged her for some water (I hadn't been allowed to drink since I left the birth centre, seven hours earlier, and had only been able to suck some ice chips in the maternity ward). She found me some vials of water which she kindly snapped

open and dripped into my mouth. Eventually she worked out where I was supposed to be, and I was taken to my room.

In my room, I found my partner, baby and parents. They had been kept in the dark, and thought I was in theatre the whole time. No one knew how long I had been alone in the hallway. Everyone left (my partner was told he couldn't stay), I was alone with my sleeping baby. I fell passed out again after drinking some water.

Through the night I woke up when my baby was crying. I immediately buzzed for the nurse, and let her know my baby was crying, and she snapped "Well, have you fed her?" Looking back now, I am embarrassed at how useless I seemed that night, but the whole experience had been so demoralising I didn't even know if I was supposed to pick up my own baby. I also realised I couldn't sit up without agonising pain.

The next morning the obstetrician came back to see me. He couldn't explain why I'd woken up alone in a hallway. He explained I'd had a fourth degree tear, had "over forty stitches", that my vagina had to be reconstructed, that I should never attempt vaginal birth again, then left the room. That was it. I never saw him again.

I spent the next week in hospital. I couldn't walk for two days. I had to attend a breastfeeding class in a wheelchair. A nurse pushed me into the classroom, then left. My baby started screaming and they called for the nurse to come back and get me, but she took ages. I was bright red with shame that no one could hear the class over my screaming baby. I felt like such a miserable failure.

Once I went home, I started to feel what I now recognise as symptoms of PTSD. I couldn't drive up the road the hospital was on. I couldn't talk about my birth. I struggled to enjoy any moment of having a baby. I took months to heal from the surgery, and I had to attend regular appointments where male doctors I'd never met asked me perfunctory questions such as, "Does faeces leak out your vagina now?" My friend who had been in the birthing room was so traumatised herself by what she'd seen happen to me, she pulled away from me. She told me years later when we talked about that time, it was because seeing me set off her own trauma brought on by what she'd witnessed.

Six months later I found the yellow cardboard discharge card that I was sent home with from hospital. I read it, and found a question that said something like, "Outcome of birth: alive or not alive?" It occurred to me then that some parents don't get to take home a baby- they just get to take home that card with the other check box ticked. That devastating thought, that at least my baby was alive, gave me the strength and courage I needed to start my healing process, and eventually I recovered. That said, sitting here writing this twenty years later, I can still FEEL the trauma in my body as I re-live this experience in my mind.

My wife and I are currently going through IVF, and she will be carrying our baby if we are lucky enough to conceive. I wonder how my own birth trauma will show up as I support her through labour, and I am terrified she will need intervention that will trigger me. We are hoping for a home birth, because the thought of being in a hospital and losing control of the process, of not being asked for consent, of being disrespected and injured is terrifying and real. I literally know dozens of women with hospital birth stories like mine- stories of medical abuse, of disfigurement and lifelong injuries from cascading layers of intervention, disrespect from staff, of being infantilised and treated as medical problems to be fixed. It seems that so long as you get to take home a baby, no one cares what happens to the birthing parent in the process.

The system is broken and it is breaking us. The trauma we experience in the current medical model of birth is damaging us as people and as parents.

Please fix it.