

Submission
No 551

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

I have had four children in NSW. During each of these pregnancies and births I experienced a number of incidents of obstetric violence. I consider obstetrics violence to be any form of coercion, unconsented interventions, unnecessary interventions, violations of dignity and privacy and loss of autonomy.

In each of my births i experienced unconsented interventions. In each birth unconsented vaginal exams and in one birth an unconsented episiotomy where my perineum was cut without my knowledge and resulted in stitches and ongoing pain and discomfort. The unconsented interventions were vaginal exams that happened throughout my labour. On some occasions it was explained to me that they were 'just going to do a vaginal exam'. This is not informed consent. Stating you are going to do something is not consent. There was no explanations of why the exam was needed and why it was deemed necessary and no opportunity to refuse it. In a number of instances fingers were placed inside my vagina probing my cervix with no words at all - the hand was between my legs and into my vagina before I knew what was going on. This is assault. Vaginal exams are painful and violating and should never occur without my consent.

In another instance I received what is commonly known as a 'stretch and sweep'. In this instance the obstetrician had sought consent to check my cervix prior to my labour starting. He stated he wanted to see if it had begun to dilate - nothing more. I consented for this vaginal exam to see if my cervix had begun to open. (Though on reflection I do not see the value in this at all as my labour had not started - the exam was entirely unnecessary). Whilst I consented to the exam, I did not however consent for the stretch and sweep which was extremely painful and involved the obstetrician rummaging forcibly around my cervix, his fingers high in my vagina to separate the membranes from the cervix. I could feel thrusting, and stretching and jabbing and an almost scratching or picking sensation high up in my vagina. It was awful. I had no idea what was happening at the time. This was my fourth child. I knew what a vaginal exam felt like and this wasn't it. It was incredibly painful and nearly had me jumping off the bed and I requested that it stop. It only stopped when he had finished - not when I said stop. I later read up on what had been done and that the purpose was to get me into labour. I was left bleeding and sore. After he had finished and I told him how much it had hurt and that no vaginal exam had ever hurt that badly before, he said that as it was my fourth baby and I was tired he decided he should help me 'get going'. I did not want this to happen, preferring to trust my body and have the labour start when it was ready as it had the three pregnancies before. I was in a great deal of pain that evening. As a result of this 'stretch and sweep' I went into labour that afternoon three weeks early and before he or I were ready for him to come. Three weeks early made my baby slightly premature. A stretch and sweep should never have been done without my knowledge or consent and not whilst my baby was still considered premature.

I also experienced the manual breaking of my waters in another labour to 'speed things up' even though my labour was progressing well. Unnecessary intervention.

There is such a focus on intervention and making things progress that a woman's intuition and the natural process is stifled and suffocated and her body is violated. All these interventions evoked fear in me and slowed my labours down rather than having the desired effect of 'getting by them going' (apart from the stretch and sweep that got it going before it was ready).

I had an epidural in my first labour. I was exhausted and frightened and vulnerable as it was my first birth. This epidural was inserted without checking my progress and was given too late. As soon as the epidural was inserted and the maternity staff lay me back down my babies head was crowning. I should never have been given an epidural. Rather than encouraging me and supporting me and telling me that I was so close and almost there and that I could do it an epidural was inserted unnecessarily given how close I was. This was devastating to me as I had wanted and worked for a natural birth for hours. This made me feel like a failure and that has stayed with me for years. Rather than encouraging me to trust my body this intervention was done quickly and without fully informed consent. I was not informed of the potential risks of an epidural in regards to the increased chance of needing an episiotomy or an instrumentally assisted birth or even a cesarean section. It was just done.

It seems to me as a person who has given birth four times in NSW that we have a maternity system that is set up for the needs of the providers rather than the needs of the women. The t feels like a conveyor belt. Get them in and make them birth quickly so everyone can get home to dinner. Birth seems to have to meet a schedule or they can't help but get their hands in to intervene and by undertaking these interventions more harm than good is often achieved. Having unconsented vaginal exams is no small thing. It is violating and painful and risky as it increases the chance of infections. I found it awful and have often thought of other women in similar positions. What about women who have previously experienced rape. This must feel like rape all over again. What about those who refuse a vaginal exam and are bullied and coerced in a time of vulnerability until they acquiesce. What affect does that have? What about women to whom English is a second language? How terrifying must this be. I have spoken to many friends, family and other women I have met regarding their birth experiences and there are so many commonalities in the stories. This seems to be a big issue from the discussions I have had.

There are so many maternity workers who go to work every day wanting the best for the women in their care and they should be acknowledged, celebrated, thanked and encouraged. But what about those who are dismissive, rude, careless. Those who play on the very large power imbalance between women and health care providers? It seems like the issues are system wide. Is this a reflection of a woman's place in society? This feels like another form of gendered violence. How is this not on the national agenda? Where is the dignity and care in it all? This is disrespect and abuse and a violation of human rights and it can not be allowed to continue. No one should be able to shove their hand into a woman's vagina without consent. in any other circumstance this would be seen as assault and a criminal matter.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit on this critical matter for women.