

Submission
No 591

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

I am a 31 year old woman and I live in [REDACTED] NSW with my husband, 3 year old daughter and 6 month old son. I have experienced birth trauma with the birth of my daughter 3 years ago in June 2020. I had my first baby in [REDACTED] Public Hospital and was under the care of [REDACTED] Midwifery clinic.

My experience was during COVID-19 which added a lot to the birth trauma. My hospital classes were canceled so I felt I had no preparation or knowledge into what would happen to me. As I was 41 weeks pregnant I visited the post dates clinic in [REDACTED]. At this point I was in early labour/ latent phase and was experiencing discharge and mild cramps / braxton hicks. I was undergoing a vaginal examination in the post dates room and felt extremely vulnerable and uncomfortable by my body on display and felt I was disgusting. When I mentioned the increased discharge to a nurse she said it was not normal and to seek advice from my GP. This made me start to cry and when I told my midwife later, she said that it was indeed normal and it was inappropriate and damaging to pregnant women to hear this, especially when it is a normal part of early labour. I went into spontaneous labour that night.

When I arrived at the hospital I was in pain and asked for a bath. I was told the room had no bath. This was disappointing as it was part of my birth plan to have no pain relief and wanted to use the bath. I had been in hospital for 10 hours and then it was time to push. I tried for 2 hours when the midwife told me to "hurry up and push before the doctor comes in because they will intervene". I started to push even more but was exhausted at this point as I did not have any pain relief and had been in labour for a total of 20 hours. The doctor came in and gave me an episiotomy and vacuumed my daughter out with 2 pulls. I was in shock and felt like a huge failure. I felt embarrassed that I was screaming so loud, I felt embarrassed that my naked body was on display, that no one told me what was happening during my birth or what they were doing to me. But I was glad it was over - a very big learning experience and quite a shock.

They then proceeded to check the baby, clean up and wheelchair me to the maternity ward. Once I arrived my husband stayed and then visiting hours were over and he had to leave. I was now alone with my baby. The nurse came to check on me and told me the baby wasn't breathing properly and would have to go to NICU. They came to take her away from me and I said "I can't walk, can the doctor come to me and explain why they are taking her away?" I was replied with "no the doctor cannot come up here" and I said "can someone wheelchair me to NICU?" And the nurse rolled her eyes at me and reluctantly got a wheelchair and took me to NICU where the nurses took my daughter away from me. The doctor asked me strange questions, such as "I see that you don't have your hepatitis B vaccination" (which I do) and I responded "I think I do?" The communication by the hospital staff was terrible as I had no idea what was wrong with my daughter, not to mention I was exhausted, alone and in a lot of pain. I left to go back to the maternity ward while my daughter was in NICU being monitored and put onto antibiotics.

I would walk very painfully and slowly between NICU and the maternity ward every 3 hours to feed the baby. It felt like an eternity to get to and from either place and it felt like I was in gaol without any visitors allowed.

When my husband visited, due to social distancing measures, only one of us could visit the baby at a time, while the other waited in the hall. Every day and night I would learn to care for my new baby and breastfeed her while talking to the NICU nurses about their lives and I was pleasant to them but no one told me what was wrong with my daughter. One night while

trying to breastfeed my daughter with cords and monitors all over her, a NICU nurse snapped at me saying “why would you feed your baby with her head turned like that, you don’t eat your food with your head turned like that, do you!” I began to cry and one of the other nurses said that this nurse was going through a hard time personally and to excuse her behaviour. It is traumatic, lonely and painful to recall this story.

One night I asked the nurse if she could look at my daughters file to see what was wrong. She said it looked like my daughter was GBS positive. I was confused and she gave me a pamphlet on this. She also said I should speak to the doctor when he comes on his rounds daily at 10am and I felt frustrated no one had told me this earlier. I walked back upstairs to maternity ward and told a nurse that my daughter was GBS positive and I cried and said I just wanted to be with my baby like all of the other mums.

The next day my husband and I waited for the doctor to do his rounds at 10am. As usual, only one of us could be present due to social distancing. I mentioned the GBS positive and he said this was inaccurate. I was very confused, I went back up to maternity where I heard the nurses handing over to each other saying my daughter was GBS positive. I corrected them and said this was untrue. Did they just get this information from me? Why did everyone have incorrect information? Were any of the NICU/maternity staff talking to each other? First about my Hepatitis B vaccination and secondly about my daughter having GBS? This was extremely poor communication and made my experience frustrating and uncertain.

It was this night that I started to get itchy on the back of my thighs. I had a warm shower and washed my legs thinking there was something on me from my bed. The next morning I woke up and had huge blisters all over the back of my legs and there was fluid from the blisters leaking onto my clothes and bed. I started to cry and called a nurse. They said they would send a GP type of doctor. I was greeted by a man with a computer who was extremely cold and stood metres away from me asking loud questions in the public ward. “Do you have allergic reactions to anything?” He asked. I replied “yes I get rashes sometimes” and he gave me a steroid cream and left. I started to use it and it didn’t get any better. I asked the midwife for a different GP to come and help and she was much more compassionate but agreed it was an allergic reaction and to just use the cream. I think the rash may have been from some cleaning fluid on the wheelchair or the nursing chair in NICU.

Finally it was time for them to discharge me and they were going to leave my daughter in NICU. I was horrified to be separated from her even more. The main doctor in NICU advocated that I should stay one more night with my daughter in maternity ward so that I could receive support from the midwives and nurses to learn how to breastfeed. I was finally reunited with my daughter and my husband in maternity ward and this was the first time we were together since she was born 4 days prior. We really just wanted to go home now. I had been alone every night and had not been allowed any visitors aside from my husband due to covid restrictions. I was exhausted and emotional.

When trying to feed the baby, we called the nurse to ask for some advice. A woman nurse walked in and when we explained we wanted help with latching she shouted “move HIM!” about my baby girl and grabbed her head and shoved it onto my breast extremely rough and my daughter was screaming. This was awful and I’ll never forget feeling like I should just trust my own instincts rather than getting this wrongful advice from professionals!

When it was finally time to go home I remember taking the extremely long walk to the carpark in pain from my episiotomy/tear from prolonged pushing, with blisters on the back of my legs

from my allergic reaction, and exhausted from no sleep or ANY support overnight being completely alone in hospital walking between NICU and maternity constantly.

At home, the family and community nurse came to visit our house and when I complained of a traumatic birth and still being in pain, she said "at least you didn't have a 4kg+ size baby like some people" I couldn't believe the complete lack of compassion of these medical professionals. I did not allow any more nurses into my home after this.

6 weeks later I still had pain and my GP referred me to the [REDACTED] women's clinic to remove some granulation tissue from scarring in my vagina. Due to covid restrictions I was not allowed to have anyone accompany me to my appointment 6 weeks post partum and had a procedure on the spot to remove this granulation tissue from my vagina whilst caring for my newborn baby.

The lack of support for new mums is heartbreaking. I have complete distrust in Australian health system and health professionals from this awful experience. I have received counselling for my birth trauma and have done a lot of research to birth my son earlier this year.

I did complain to [REDACTED] hospital and only received a letter apologising for the poor level of care.

I believe knowledge is power and if we can allow more mums to feel educated on the factual aspects of birth/postpartum, advocating for their rights and their babies, then we will have less birth trauma and more empowered, happy mums who are mentally able to care for their children.