

Submission
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INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

My name is _____, I'm a mum of two and for both my births I was under the care of _____ Hospital, once in 2018 and once in 2021. I have a degree in health science and am a health care provider myself, but I still struggled to navigate the maternity care system to get the outcomes I wanted for my babies and I. My experiences have led me to decide that I will never birth within the hospital system again, I've come to think that if I decide to birth again it will be a home birth or possibly a free birth because I now have such an aversion to hospital care.

My first pregnancy and birth was extremely traumatic. For a bit of context, I was fairly young when I became a mum, I'd only just turned 26 and none of my peers had babies. I had a history of complex trauma, anxiety and depression. I was being supported through those conditions by a private psychologist and an antenatal mental health team. I eventually stopped seeing the antenatal mental health team because I was being coerced into taking antidepressants under the threat that I would damage my baby if I was too depressed to bond after birth. Due to my past trauma I had quite strong people pleasing tendencies and I had trouble speaking up for my needs, so I had very little ability to properly advocate for myself, though I did try throughout my whole perinatal experience.

I experienced vaginal bleeding through my pregnancy up to the third trimester. I would have various levels of bleeding most weeks. I lived in constant fear of miscarrying my baby. I called the hospital a couple of times when there were bigger bleeds but they could never give me much idea of what was happening or what I should do. The best they could offer was for me to come into the hospital for monitoring. I mentioned the bleeds at my midwife appointments too and they were even less helpful. I was terrified of losing my baby all the time but no one seemed to understand the fear I was living in or even just offer supportive words/actions.

I was diagnosed with Gestational Diabetes at about 29 weeks gestation. When I met with a diabetes educator at _____ Hospital I explained that I was concerned about how I would be testing my blood sugar levels because I had a needle phobia. The educator showed me how to test my blood sugar levels by finger pricking and then told me to try. I broke down in tears because I didn't know how to cope with my needle phobia and finger pricking. I'm not exaggerating here at all when I say that the diabetes educator sat across from me and laughed at how badly I was coping with the situation. I was crying in fear and she was laughing. She seemed very young, younger than me, so in retrospect I assume she was very inexperienced and completely ill-equipped to support a patient like myself.

The vast majority of my gestational diabetes care was patronising, unhelpful and damaging. I had a history of disordered eating and it flared terribly during all the diet tracking but literally no care provider asked about that at any point. At my 34 week appointment at the hospital I was sat in a room with an obstetrician and told that the doctor would induce me before 39 weeks because I had gestational diabetes (which is not an evidence-based recommendation). It wasn't an informed discussion, I was being told what would happen. I was being pressured into agreeing to induction when I probably still had at least 6 weeks of pregnancy left.

I was admitted to hospital after my waters broke one night at 35 weeks. Gentle contractions started almost immediately but by the following evening I was quite uncomfortable, with what I now know were contractions, but was told I was just in early labour. I stressed that it was getting quite uncomfortable but they reinforced that they considered I was just in early labour. I brought up that I had a birth plan and I had a printed copy with me but no one was interested. I repeatedly reiterated that I suffered from anxiety and wasn't sure how that would play out in labour but no one seemed particularly interested in that either.

As the evening progressed I got more and more uncomfortable. I used swaying, movement and music to get through the intensity of what I was feeling. I got really afraid of labour because I thought that if this was only 'early labour' how the heck was I going to do full blown labour!? My whole birth plan collapsed and I'd have to get the epidural I was so afraid of (needle phobia). I was shaking and scared of each coming contraction. My partner was present but asleep most of the night, no staff came to check on me. I was alone, unsupported, in a maternity room (not a birthing room because they denied I was in labour), in excruciating and ever-increasing pain without anyone believing what I was experiencing and afraid of what was to come in my labour. It was an incredibly invalidating and disempowering feeling that reinforced all my prior life trauma.

I eventually woke my partner up and said that I didn't think I could do this anymore. He called for the nurse who gave me a patronisingly compassionate look and offered me some Panadol forte and to try a warm shower. I did both, couldn't stand in the shower so had to sit and was shuddering from the intensity of the contractions. The Panadol did pretty much nothing (though I was told by a doctor later that apparently it can inhibit labour?). They said around this time that they would get the doctor to come when they could to examine me and see how dilated I was. I didn't want the exam but I did want some validation for what I was going through so I agreed. No one explained possible risks and benefits of invasive vaginal exams.

When I did a debrief later I found out the doctor examined me about 5am and I was 7cm dilated. Given my feelings of not being able to go on I've thought I may have been in transition. It was a huge relief to know I wasn't simply in 'early labour', I had already done most of my labour. Alone and unsupported over about 10 hours overnight. One midwife at that point called me "a machine" for having got through all that labour by myself.

They finally moved me to a birthing room around the same time the sun was coming up. As we walked the doctor tried talking to me about pain relief options. I was so exhausted from the physical and emotional ordeal of labouring alone that I decided to try the gas. In the room there were lots of staff, the blinds were open and the morning sun was streaming in. Pretty much the opposite of what a conducive labour environment is. The gas helped the pain a bit but affected my mental capacity and that combined with my lack of sleep over about 48hrs (hadn't slept properly since the night before I went into labour), a lot of that morning is a blur in my memory.

My labour stalled. In retrospect it was probably just a natural slow patch of labour that my body was giving me to recover from my ordeal. But the hospital decided to intervene. They got us to consent to Pitocin, there was no informed consent. In a later debrief the maternity unit manager admitted we actually probably didn't need it at all, I had a very low dose. It made the contractions more painful but I was so tired I dozed in between them. They attached a foetal electrode to monitor our baby's heartrate and got us to consent by calling it a "clip that attaches to baby's head". They neglected to inform us that it was actually a screw that was screwed into our baby's scalp. She had a dent in her head for months after that, it may still be there, she just has too much hair now to tell. I felt enormously deceived by that omission of the facts.

I laboured all morning and then around midday a young midwife came in and simply told me it was time to push and I was going to have a baby. Her and a student midwife I'd met before got me to labour laying on my back with my knees pulled up to my chest, holding my breath to push (an outdated method of birthing with many known risks). I had no desire to push and my body gave me no positive feedback or relief when I did push. I felt cornered, vulnerable and violated. I just wanted it to end in any way that could end my experience. I pushed so hard I burst a blood vessel in my eye. In a later debrief the unit manager firstly admitted the midwife was young and inexperienced and secondly said that the baby probably hadn't descended enough for me to be ready to push yet.

As I pushed they coached me, their coaching made me feel like I wasn't doing a good enough job and that I needed to rush to get baby out. At one point I heard them say, "prep her for *something*", later debrief suggested it was prepping for instrumental delivery (which I did not want and had given no consent for). Because our baby was premature there was a team of paediatric doctors on standby, they kept walking in and out of the room in my eyesight and chatting amongst themselves about their weekend and whatever. When they thought she would be born they would come in and when I failed to push her out that contraction they would walk out. I was almost at the point of just telling them to give me a c-section (which I didn't want either) because I just couldn't do it anymore.

My baby was born and I wasn't happy, I was just relieved my ordeal was over. I was numb and exhausted. I think I dissociated to be able to deal with the trauma of that pushing stage of labour and I had trouble reconnecting with the world after that, let alone my baby. I thanked my midwives profusely for getting me through that, not realising at the time that they were the perpetrators of my trauma. I tried to pass the baby to my partner to do skin to skin because I was so out of it but they discouraged us because they said the mother should hold her. I didn't want to hold her, I didn't have any connection with her but I felt I had to because they said I needed to do it. I just desperately wanted to sleep. I have experienced lifelong bouts of insomnia but I had never been that tired before.

I was given stitches for a first degree tear without being given a choice as to whether or not I wanted them. While the doctor, who never even introduced himself, did the stitches he used his finger to penetrate my anus without asking me (presumably for a haemorrhoid but I've never actually followed that up). While I laid there in stirrups being stitched other doctors and staff walked in to chat to the staff tending to me, no one gave any privacy or reverence to my 'golden hour'.

We were left in the birthing room after I showered, just waiting to be transferred to a maternity room. The bed was unmade and I was just sitting slumped in a chair while my partner held the baby. The paediatrician poked his head in, didn't introduce himself, commented how exhausted I looked and left.

Eventually they got me to wheel baby in the bassinet to the maternity ward, all the staff congratulated us but I still felt numb. It felt like I was talking to people from down the end of a tunnel. It was really hard to hear people, respond to them and use my brain and mouth to talk back. We got to the room and I just knew I had to sleep to survive so I did. No taking photos of baby or staring lovingly at our new creation. They came and woke us up when it was getting dark and tried to force a breastfeed. Baby couldn't latch on so I got poked and prodded and she was eventually admitted to special care nursery. It was a nightmare.

I wanted to stay with my baby but I was so exhausted I had to just turn around and leave her so I could sleep to survive. I heard another SCN mum say, "I could never leave my baby", and I felt so guilty. I was triple feeding, squeezing out colostrum to be syringed up, then it went to pumping, grabbing an hours sleep, shoving some food in and going back to feed baby on a 3 hourly schedule. We got fearmongered into giving consent for her to have formula for a while. All the midwives gave us different and conflicting feeding advice and had different opinions about if we were ready to go home. It constantly felt like I had to get their approval, I needed their approval of my breastfeeding ability to be able to leave the hospital and get away from this whole traumatic experience. I was also discharged after 2 days, I was able to stay but told if they didn't have enough space I could be sent home any time while my baby still needed to stay, the threat of being separated from my baby hung over me the whole time.

The last night I was there my partner could no longer stay with me because I got moved to a shared room. I was alone, still exhausted and completely traumatised. I still felt like I was down a tunnel (it took months to get out of that feeling). When the idea of me going home the next day was mentioned by a staff member I jumped on it and pushed to get us out of there. In my head I thought that at least if I could get us out of there we would be left alone and I could finally let all my feelings out instead of having to push them down to meet the approval of the midwives everyday. We got home later that day but I still couldn't get the emotions out, I would say that to this day I have never fully released the trauma that happened in the hospital. I didn't even recognise that what I had been through was birth trauma until the unit manager told me that my experience would be classed as 'birth trauma' at a debrief. That was one of the only validating bits of care the hospital ever provide for me.

It took a long time for the full enormity of the trauma to sink in. I still experience moments where something new sinks in, I've had flashbacks and often wondered if I have PTSD from it. I never got post partum depression but my partner did, he put a lot of it down to the second hand trauma he experienced during our birthing experience.

After the birth of my second child I decided to study to be a pregnancy and post-partum Doula. While combining those studies with my health science knowledge, I realised how our maternity system is not at all in line with the best scientific evidence that we have.

We need more continuity of care for mothers. We need more Medicare subsidised homebirth programs. We need perinatal healthcare practitioners to provide woman-centred care. We need to be providing evidence-based care. The science and data is there to tell us what would improve outcomes for mothers, babies, families and our entire society but it isn't being acted upon.

Rates of home and free birthing are increasing because women are being actively damaged in the maternity care system and they're refusing to go back into a system with a 1 in 3 chance of traumatising them.

By implementing the evidence into our maternity system we could save the lives of mothers and babies, improve their overall outcomes and save our health system and government a lot of money. From where I'm standing, there are no downsides to using the science to better our maternity system.