

Submission
No 627

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

I am 31 years old. I live with my husband on [REDACTED] land in [REDACTED] Sydney. I am a professional with a Masters degree, and I have one child who is 14 months old.

During my labour in [REDACTED], I experienced disrespect, my questions and wishes were dismissed and I felt scared and alone. I was pushed and coerced into decisions that were not fully informed and that I will always deeply regret and question.

At one point, after my epidural had worn off and I was in extreme pain, the obstetrician and a team of other medical staff entered the room. There was a male who was a medical student. I wished he wasn't there, but I couldn't speak through my contractions. He was in the room while the obstetrician did a vaginal exam. I was naked from the hips down, legs spread and feeling so vulnerable. I had clearly written in my birth preferences - a document which I shared with the staff as soon as I arrived in hospital in labour - that I did not want any medical students or men present, and this was ignored.

The obstetrician told me that it was recommended that I have a c-section, which was the last thing I wanted. I was scared of having caesarean surgery, and asked what the other options were. The obstetrician never told me what my options actually were; what would happen if I didn't have a c-section. The obstetrician said "it's your body, your choice..you don't have to have it but that's what I recommend." Then the obstetrician listed the risks if I didn't have a c-section - it was very scary to hear, and the obstetrician had no warmth or softness or sensitivity.

I also want to note that I had told the hospital in my booking in appointment that I am a survivor of child sexual abuse. At the start of my pregnancy, when I shared this, I was reassured I would be treated respectfully and with my trauma experience in mind, and this was clearly not the case.

I asked the obstetrician if there were any benefits to having a vaginal birth, but the answer was a repeat, "all I can say is I recommend a c-section." After my husband asked multiple times, we confirmed the baby was not in distress and this was not an emergency.

I still don't really understand to this day why the obstetrician was so adamant about a c-section.

We asked for more time, and finally the obstetrician and the whole team of staff left the room. My husband said to our midwife that we wanted a second opinion, but the midwife said the obstetrician was the consultant and there wasn't going to be any other opinions.

I felt helpless, scared and stuck.

I didn't want to have a c-section, but I guess I was so exhausted (I had been in labour for over 36 hours at this point) and I was in excruciating pain after the epidural wore off, and it seemed there were no other options. It was unclear what would happen if I said I wanted to keep waiting and try for a vaginal birth.

When the obstetrician came in again I said I just wanted to meet my baby now and a c-section surgery was confirmed, and then there was a rush of activity and suddenly I was being wheeled off by some man who never said a word to me, off to an operating theatre. I was crying.

The operating theatre was so loud. People spoke about me in the third person 'what level shall I give her?' "moving her leg" and I was so overwhelmed and confused.

I had asked the obstetrician to please place the baby on my chest for skin to skin contact immediately after the birth, and the obstetrician had agreed, unless resuscitation was needed. When my baby was born, my baby screamed loudly and was a healthy pink colour. Then my baby was taken off and had a team of medical staff surrounding them, poking and prodding. I was physically shaking and crying. I wanted to ask someone if my baby was OK and why they had been taken from me, but nobody was there for me to ask.

I felt like I had been forgotten.

It was nearly 20 minutes later that my baby was finally placed on my chest. The midwife said, "your baby is so healthy, and they've got a strong set of lungs!" My baby was still screaming loudly.

My baby was a healthy baby and there were no complications at birth - there was no reason why my baby could not have been placed on my chest straight away. I am deeply sad, angry and disappointed that this did not happen. This has affected my confidence as a mother, it has affected our breastfeeding journey, my baby's sleep.

I also want to add that earlier in my labour I had asked the obstetrician that I would like there to be delayed cord clamping. I had done a lot of research into birth and had written out my birth preferences clearly. The obstetrician chuckled and said, "I'm not going to do that." My husband and I asked a few times, and the obstetrician finally said "maybe for 30 seconds or so then." I felt like the obstetrician thought this was a silly request and didn't take it seriously.

My birth was supposed to be an empowering, joyful experience.

My preferences and my values were - and are - so important, and I felt like I was not taken seriously.

After my birth, I was wheeled off by another man who I'd never seen, and again he never said a word to me. My husband was not allowed to come into the recovery place with me, so we were separated for half an hour or so. I felt so confused and numb, and these were the first moments of being a mother.

When we were finally all together - my baby, my husband and I - there was a midwife who we'd never met before. She didn't make much eye contact, and because it was 1am she said curtly to my husband, "you have to leave now."

After he left I cried and cried.

The midwife had placed my baby in a plastic bassinet next to my bed and because I had a c-section, I couldn't pick my baby up, even when they were crying through that first night. It was only the next day that a nicer midwife came in and asked me if I wanted to hold my baby, and told me I could ask for assistance for midwives through the day or night while I was in hospital, if my baby was crying and I wanted to hold them.

I really hope that medical staff have some training in being trauma informed, understanding what fully informed consent means, and respecting a birthing person's choices and preferences.