

Submission  
No 628

## INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

**Name:** Name suppressed

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Partially  
Confidential

My first baby was born seven years ago, and while it feels like a long time ago now, that day remains fresh. The scars are still painful when prodded. I had hoped for continuity of care and an intervention-free birth, but once I was diagnosed with gestational diabetes (at just .1 over the threshold) I wasn't able to join the midwifery group practice at my local public hospital (██████████ NSW) and instead saw a rotation of OBs. Rarely did I see one twice. I was weighed each visit; I felt like I had done something wrong. The diet supplied for GD seemed like it was from the 80s, encouraging us to eat low fat yoghurt (with added sugar) and heaps of carbs.

When, at 38 weeks pregnant, I was told I wouldn't be "allowed" to go to 40 weeks and would need an induction soon if I didn't go into labour spontaneously, I said I didn't want one if possible. That was met with, "well, if you don't have an induction you're at risk of a stillbirth." That terrified me, I consented, and a week later I was being readied for an induction. After the cervidil gel I had in the evening, a restless night I had to spend in a hospital bed, I began having mild contractions the next morning. The midwives wanted to break my waters mid morning. I asked why we couldn't wait: "We need to get things moving so that you have this baby before we get to the overnight shift," I was told. My waters were broken, I was put on the syntocinon drip. The pain instantly went into hyperdrive, and I eventually asked for an epidural. When it kicked in, it was great - but a very strange, disembodied experience. I didn't feel like I was in labour at all, yet I watched the contractions surge on the monitor. Eventually, I was given a vaginal examination and told I was almost 10 centimetres. At the same time, it was discovered that somehow, the epidural had become disconnected.

I was told it was too late to do anything, and I would begin to feel the contractions within about 10 minutes. The shock that I went through going from feeling nothing to feeling everything at 10 cm dilated, without any compassion from the new midwife who came on shift, was immense. I felt panicked. To make matters worse, the midwife was abrupt, rude and bullying. She was older, and it appears so was her training. When I vocalised, I was told to "stop screaming" and use the energy to push down. When I tried to manoeuvre my body during a contraction, I was told to "sit up straight". There was no kindness, no tenderness, no respect in her tone, her words or her manner. I felt like I was doing things wrong, that I was being a nuisance. Eventually, after an episiotomy and vacuum help, my daughter was born. I reminded the staff that I wanted immediate skin to skin - no, my baby needed to be checked over under the bright lights. I lay there, sweaty and panting, as the OB stitched up my episiotomy cut, waiting to meet my wailing baby. Eventually, she was unceremoniously and roughly plonked onto my chest by the same abrasive midwife. She had a mildly elevated temperature, which means that after our first feed, she was taken away to the nursery, where student doctors attempted to give her antibiotics but couldn't get the needle in (I was later told by the paediatric doctor that this was "overkill"). I was left with my arms empty. I felt like I'd been to battle, and barely made it out alive.

The next night, my husband went home to sleep and I couldn't seem to settle my baby. I didn't know about night two cluster feeding. Instead of educating me or reassuring me, the nurse on duty laughed and said, "Oh yes, this is what we call hell night." Hearing that, while trying to process what I'd been through, all alone, sent me into an anxious spiral. There was no support offered.

That set the tone for a postpartum with postpartum anxiety and breastfeeding difficulties. Thank god for the lactation consultant in hospital and my home visiting midwife, [REDACTED] who showed me so much kindness and reassured me during the week I came home. I will never forget it.

I later discovered that the absolute risk of stillbirth with GDM was extremely low, and now I know so much more, I am furious that I was coerced into having one as I feel it contributed to how my birth unfolded.

It pains me to think that as a white, middle class, tertiary educated woman, I still felt pushed into options that didn't feel like choices. The hospital had plenty of migrant women who spoke English as a second language - what chance did they have?

I couldn't think about having another baby without feeling physically ill until my child was three and I started getting counselling for my birth trauma. I lost faith in the hospital system, which seemed far more interested in managing risk and adhering to protocol than offering individualised, compassionate care.

For my second pregnancy, I ended up hiring a private midwife for a home birth who offered me continuity of care from 14 weeks pregnant to 6 weeks postpartum. Of course, it cost and I didn't get much back from Medicare. Even though I was diagnosed with gestational diabetes again, I went through my GP and a private endocrinologist to manage it with diet and insulin. I went to 42 weeks pregnant, and had an empowering birth in my bathroom at home. My baby was healthy and happy. I felt strong and supported, and I'm very grateful to have had that experience.

I believe we need:

Continuity of care, with more MGPs and home visiting programs like CAPS

Evidence based practice around induction - not coercion

Better breastfeeding support

Subsidised IBCLCs

Medicare subsidised home births

More postpartum care and support through programs and doulas

Midwives and MCHNs desperately need to be upskilled to the latest evidence and in ways to support women with compassion

Subsidised pelvic floor physios