

Submission  
No 634

## INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

**Name:** Name suppressed

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Partially  
Confidential

My baby was born via caesarean in May 2021. I had planned a home birth with a private midwife and laboured naturally at home for 25 hours. When it was clear my labour was obstructed we transferred to hospital. I have heard stories about home birth transfer women being treated poorly by hospital staff, judged for their choices and generally treated with a lack of compassion that what they had wanted for their birth had gone so far awry. This was thankfully not the case for me: the attending obstetrician was kind, caring and empathetic and I was so grateful. She put her hand on my shoulder and asked me if I was okay after I had agreed to a caesarean. She said, I know this is not what you wanted, and it must be so hard. I felt seen, and that made a huge difference in that moment. Thanks to her – and most especially the continuity of care from my midwife - I knew the caesarean was a necessary step to get myself and my baby through our birth safely. It was not traumatic, because there were no interventions to muddy the waters, no cascade to point the finger at. I had been listened to and respected throughout the process, by a midwife I know and trust and then by a doctor who treated me like an individual and showed me she cared. It was simply my pelvic anatomy that prevented her from being born vaginally. It is not so simple for most women that end up birthing in theatre, and I cannot begin to understand their distress in wondering if it was necessary.

What was traumatic, however, was the paediatrician's decision to admit my baby to the NICU for monitoring despite her APGAR scores being 8 and 9 respectively. At no stage of labour had she shown signs of distress. I was unable to hold or even properly see my baby for hours, in what has since been described by a trusted senior midwife at the hospital as an 'institutional decision' because I was a home birth transfer and had been pushing for many hours. Like most women who aim for natural birth, I had spent nine long months dreaming about and visualising the moment when my baby would be born, and I would reach down and bring her up to my chest. The first golden hour of gazing at one another, falling in love, initiating breastfeeding, finally holding this most precious person in my arms. That meant everything to me, such that I cannot even put it accurately into words. The universe in my arms. To have been denied this because of an unnecessary NICU admission is terribly hurtful, and reverberated through my postpartum. It played a big role in me developing postnatal depression and feeling like I had failed my baby in her tender first hours. My heart broke that she laid on a cold bed under bright lights instead of on her mother's warm body. In my darkest moments, I worried that someone else's baby had returned from the NICU and been placed into my arms for the first time. I still search her face for similarities to mine, evidence they gave me the right baby. Thankfully she looks a lot like me, but still, the thought lurks like an unwanted house guest. I am so ashamed of it. And it's because of our separation at birth.

I understand NICU admissions save lives and I am immeasurably grateful to live in a country where this safety net is available to me and my babies. But in our instance it was overly cautious at the expense of my bond with my baby, my rite of passage that is birth. It had a lasting negative impact on me and probably also her, although I hope not. I know women are routinely separated from newborn babies following caesareans, even without NICU admissions, due to hospital staffing issues in which midwives are unavailable to attend recovery with the woman and baby, rather are needed back on the birth unit ASAP. Thus the woman goes to recovery alone, and the baby and partner go to the postnatal ward. This must stop. It is traumatising and hugely damaging to the bond between mother and baby. It adds an unnecessary layer of hurt and loss for women already grieving the loss of a natural birth, even as they thank their lucky stars for their live baby. In the first moments of life, babies

belong with their mothers, unless there is a real medical reason that prevents it. This is not a nice added bonus, or icing atop a cake for the lucky ones. It is a human right for mother and child. The impact of separation of mothers and babies following caesarean cannot continue to be minimised. The trauma and pain are real, their impact lasting years. We must be acknowledged. Hospital policies must prevent this from happening unless medically indicated.