

Submission
No 653

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

I had 12 months of physical recovery post a traumatic birth I experienced. The emotional recovery is still ongoing 2 years later. It has affected my relationship with friends, family, my partner and my baby.

I endured 3 separate operations due to misconduct during birth.

I have ongoing issues with my pelvic floor.

If I am to have another baby it will now be deemed high risk, I will need to have a c section to ensure safety to myself and my baby, meaning choices have been taken away from me.

The support offered to me after my traumatic experience was non-existent. And this is not good enough! My name is [REDACTED] and I live in Sydney, Australia. I am 31 years old and have birthed two children in Sydney through the hospital system.

I experienced birth trauma during my first birth on the 3rd of April, 2019. Throughout my first pregnancy, I was determined to do all I could to have a natural birth if possible. I knew the benefits for myself, my baby and our breastfeeding journey. Hence, I joined the Birth Centre program at [REDACTED] early in my pregnancy, and enjoyed the care I received throughout the pregnancy. I developed a positive relationship and trust with the midwives who provided a continuity of care. I felt positive as I approached my birth.

However, as soon as I passed 40 weeks, the rhetoric immediately shifted toward talk of induction. I felt extremely pressured to induce labour because I was 'overdue'. This caused a sense of fear and distrust of my own body's ability. I continued to resist, feeling extremely uncomfortable and a desire to give my body the time I knew it needed to birth my baby when my body was ready. I felt pressured into a 'stretch and sweep' procedure to "move things along" which I eventually agreed to at 40+3. That night, my membranes ruptured, and I was asked to return to the hospital for assessment. There, I was bombarded with talk of "risk of infection" and "putting baby at risk". I felt a sense of panic and fear as doctors spoke at me, not alongside me. Language is so important - I felt practitioners used coercive language and framed my body and baby in a way that left me disempowered and reliant on a medical system for what should be a physiological process. I didn't feel listened to. I asked for a more senior doctor and (through tears and fear) told her I would be returning home to allow my body more time. She was not happy about this, but scheduled an induction for 24hrs time.

Unfortunately this was not enough time for my body, and I ended up having an induction at 40+5. I was suddenly no longer in the care of my known midwives, but transferred out of the Birth Centre to the Birth Unit for more clinical care. I lost my team of midwives, and instead I met a new midwife as the IV was put in, and although she was kind and seemed to do her job, the whole process felt extremely unnatural and isolating. The labour progressed extremely quickly as the syntocinon took effect. It was an extremely horrible, relentless, painful and dark experience. I was told I could not get into the bath until I was "further along". I felt restricted by medical equipment and monitors. Overall, I felt that things were happening TO my body, rather than natural processes coming FROM WITHIN my body, and this felt terribly scary. I was in active labour for under 2 hours when baby was born - an extremely quick labour. I believe that due to the fast and furious nature of my synthetically-induced labour, my baby's

heart rate became distressed, and this is when things turned frantic. I experienced a cascade of intervention. Approximately 6 people entered the room, did not introduce themselves, turned on all the lights, and forced me onto my back (despite the fact I had expressed to the midwife I wanted to birth upright). I immediately felt so much more pain in this position. They moved my legs into stirrups. Staff spoke at me and stood above me. They told me they needed to assist baby and proceed to attach a ventouse. I was verbally pressured to “push push push” (in a loud and forceful manner) despite my body not having a contraction at the time. I was told to stop verbalising, shut my mouth, and put my chin on my chest. The worst part was when my perineum was cut without my consent. I screamed in response to the horrific pain I felt. The unconsented episiotomy was a form of obstetric violence that would later have long-term physical and psychological effects.

After my baby was placed on my chest, I felt shock and numbness. I could hear the doctors talking together about how my cut was a “good one” and I felt so exposed to have a private part of my body spoken about right in front of me, particularly after I felt violated by their act of cutting me. Afterward, my baby developed a large bruise and bump on her head from the ventouse, and I realised that an internal monitoring device (foetal scalp electrode, involving a spiral wire attached to the scalp) had also been attached to her head without my consent - the screw leaving a small wound on my newborn. I felt extremely sad and disappointed about this, and the fact I was never provided an opportunity to give informed consent. Following birth, I felt very distressed as I began my breastfeeding journey. I experienced staff forcefully place their hands on my breasts and try to ‘shape’ it for my baby to begin sucking. When I experienced trouble, they attempted to have me pump with a machine despite the fact I was asking for gentle guidance.

The trauma associated with my painful, rapid, and disempowering birth experience comes down to the fact that both my agency and voice were quelled at multiple points. I was disappointed by health professionals who did not support me and my body’s ability to birth my baby. Coercive language, fear tactics, unconsented actions, and use of phrases such as “we are just going to...” is simply not acceptable. At my six week check-up, following a painful infection at the site of my episiotomy wound (which had also been sutured too tight), the gynaecologist told me to “get a cosmetic procedure to fix it all up; just wait until you are finished having kids, many women do”. I felt like I was essentially being told to put up with pain and disfigurement simply because this was a common experience for women after birthing children. How utterly disappointing.

Two years later, I was preparing to birth my second baby. I felt anxious. I decided to support and equip myself with knowledge of my body’s function and abilities during birth, as well as current birth culture in Australia. I undertook a birth and breastfeeding education course by Dr Robyn Thompson, where I was taught to always ask about the ‘risks, benefits, and alternatives’, and that I could actually say ‘no’. I immersed myself in information and resources from Rhea Dempsey, where I learnt to trust the natural hormone processes in physiological birth and reframe labour as ‘physiological pain, not pathological pain’. I viewed the documentary ‘Birth Time’ and realised that what had happened to me two years prior was valid trauma, and that I was birthing in a broken system that contributed to this negative experience. I sought out a Midwifery Group Practice program at [REDACTED] Public, believing this to be an avenue for a safer birth experience. I was right. I shared my story with my two

allocated midwives. They took the time to know me: my history, my body, my desires for birth and beyond. They supported my desire for an uninterrupted physiological birth as I progressed to full term.

As happened previously, I was 40+5 when my membranes ruptured (naturally this time!) yet my labour did not establish straight away. I went to hospital for initial monitoring with my known midwife, where I was faced with unknown obstetricians coercing me to be induced. I was told that "since there are no beds available tomorrow, we should just do this now". When I declined the induction, I was met with the usual "risk of infection" information, which I was willing to listen to, but was also met with extremely inappropriate and insensitive comments from the doctor who referred to my nephew's tragic death during labour (he was birthed stillborn one year prior, unknown reasons) as a reason for why I should not take any risks with my own child. My partner and I were disgusted by this, as was my midwife. I signed against the induction, feeling that I knew the risk and that the coercive tactics by these doctors was not enough of a reason to proceed. I decided to give my body more time to establish labour.

I am so thankful that I used my voice, made an informed decision, and listened to my body. After returning home, contractions began and I laboured through the night in the safety and comfort of my home. When I felt the need to go to the hospital, I did so. I entered a calm and quiet birth suite, and immediately got into the bath as discussed with my midwife prior. The pain of this labour was nothing like the excruciation of my previous induction. I could feel my body naturally working hard just as it should, but this time the pain was manageable. I avoided the cascade of intervention. After two hours of gentle support and encouragement from my partner and trusted midwife, I birthed my second baby calmly in the water. I lifted my baby to my chest, and experienced unhurried and uninterrupted time with my baby. I asked the staff to respect my desire for at least three hours of skin to skin and leisurely breastfeeding without any 'routine procedures' given that the baby's APGAR score was fine. I returned home that day and was glad to be removed from the hospital system.

My second birth was positive and a healing experience. I felt listened to, respected, and supported by my midwifery team who provided me with the gold standard of continuity of care. I felt empowered to ask for the risks, benefits and alternatives when making decisions about my body and baby. I felt empowered to say 'no thank you'. I felt my partner was treated as an equal in the process. I felt emotionally and physically well after this birth. What a contrast to my first birth. Why can't everyone experience this?

This system is broken and needs to change. Birth can be positive, and trauma can be avoided. The introduction of better training of professionals, laws that protect birthing people, and accurate birth education for birthing people are absolutely necessary in order for us to see change. This is a human rights issue. Please do something.