

Submission
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INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

To whom this may concern,

This is my birth story for the NSW Birth Trauma Inquiry.

My name is . I am now 34 years old. I had a difficult pregnancy in 2020. I was 31 and my model of care was GP shared care with Hospital. My pregnancy was a depressing time for me. I spent most of it in bed, debilitated with nausea and vomiting caused by hyperemesis gravidarum. I bled a little throughout because of a hematoma, which was scary. By the end of my pregnancy I could barely walk as my pelvic and groin pain was so severe. I started at 50kg and ended the pregnancy at about 73kg.

I was concerned throughout my pregnancy that I was going to have a big baby. I was worried how I was going to birth a baby when I could barely walk as I was struggling with shocking pelvic and groin pain. My worries were dismissed by midwives who told me I would be fine.

At 39 weeks my water broke naturally. My husband took me to the hospital. I was soaking pad after pad, but no contractions yet. The hospital told me that if my contractions didn't start before morning, they would induce me in the morning. I knew I wouldn't make it to morning and the contractions would come very soon. We got home at around 5pm. I tried to eat a bit and rest. As soon as I laid my head on the pillow at 9pm... BOOM! The contractions started. They came in waves and quite quickly I was progressing to contractions about 3-4 seconds apart. I couldn't labour at home anymore. I was shaking and wanted to keep going to the toilet to evacuate my bowels. I was in excruciating pain, sometimes it was worse in my back and sometimes my abdomen. My husband took me to the hospital at about 1am and from memory I was about 6-7cm dilated.

I was progressing well. I had a morphine shot which made me throw up. I tried the gas which helped me to calm down my breathing. I was told I was almost fully dilated around 5am. I was so tired but I didn't feel the need or urge to push at all despite being told to keep pushing. My second stage ended up being prolonged.

By 6am I couldn't take it anymore. I wanted an epidural. I was talked out of it earlier in the night. I was now almost fully dilated and having an epidural. It wasn't what I wanted but I was just so exhausted and in so much pain. I remember the Dr saying. "I think you're going to be pushing for a while, you should have the epidural." Apparently she was finishing her shift and she looked like she wanted to leave. My husband told me that I became hysterical when she told me this and I then demanded it. I was just in too much pain and I didn't feel like the baby was coming anytime soon. I was very conflicted as I had been advised against an epidural all night by my husband and the midwives as they said the baby was coming soon. But here the Dr was telling me to do it. So I listened to her and did it. I was so confused and I remember feeling shame and disappointment in myself. I could still feel my legs but I stopped feeling the contractions and cried in relief that now I could rest a little. Soon I was told to push and I did

so for 2 and a half hours, in many positions, but nothing happened. I tried so hard and I can honestly say I couldn't have tried any harder to push my baby out.

I needed to be induced now because everything had slowed down. I didn't get to rest for long because suddenly my baby went into distress and another different Dr said that I had been pushing for too long now. He said he wanted to give me an episiotomy. I instantly remembered the birthing classes at the hospital with the vacuum and forceps demonstrations. None of the risks were mentioned in the classes and were almost described as somewhat normal. Despite this, I was still absolutely petrified of forceps. It was my greatest fear and I couldn't even touch them or look at them when they were passed around the class.

The day before my water broke, I wrote in my pregnancy diary that my greatest wish was to have an intervention free birth. After a shocking pregnancy, I was devastated that everything was going wrong. I remember saying to the Dr "do I have to?"

He said "I really want to."

He looked concerned and all of a sudden there were a lot more people in the birthing room. It seemed like an emergency. I broke down and started crying and said "ok just do it."

I was then given an episiotomy. The cut apparently wasn't deep enough, so another cut was made. The Dr asked if he could use the vacuum.

"Just do it," I screamed.

It didn't work.

He asked if he could use the forceps "just do it," I screamed again.

I gave consent without being told or knowing just how much damage forceps can create and how strong the correlation is between pelvic floor damage and the use of forceps. My heart was beating like crazy and I felt like I was going to pass out. I was so scared my baby was going to die. I could hear the Dr saying "we need this baby out now, he has to come out now. Now! Now!" He was calm as he spoke but there was an urgency and seriousness to his voice that still gives me chills. I just remember praying in my head as my baby was ripped out of me. The force in which he was ripped out of me, will haunt me forever. My whole body felt like I was getting dragged down the bed. He didn't cry at first, but I felt so relieved when he cried out to me. He felt huge and slimy on my chest and I said to him; "you made it, didn't you." I was so relieved. I had a healthy 3.66kg baby boy. He had marks around his eyes and head from the forceps but I didn't even really notice. I waited for more pain but it sort of just stopped. The Dr stitched me up for what felt like an hour.

I knew the damage would be bad. How could it not be? I just never knew just how long my recovery would take and how much I would need to advocate for myself.

I thanked the Dr for getting my baby out. I was so grateful. Now though, everyday I wish I had asked this Dr or probably the one before for a c section instead. I truly believe this could have avoided all the damage to my once strong pelvic floor.

I had a very sore cut from the episiotomy and I also had tearing downwards towards my anus and upward tearing towards my clitoris.

I had a catheter for 2 days. After they took it out, to my shock, I couldn't hold my urine in at all. I had no control. It was alarming, I had not prepared for this. I made an appointment right away to see a pelvic physio.

The first night after I had given birth, I barely slept. I think maybe I was in a bit of shock and I felt like I had surges of adrenaline coursing through my veins.

The pain was bad on day 3. I ended up going home that night. My baby was perfect, but I felt like I could barely walk. My whole body ached like I had been hit by a bus and I couldn't sit properly.

I had a few home visits from midwives. I was even congratulated for having a "natural" birth. I didn't feel that there was anything natural about it. I cried a lot and felt that this was not normal. I had my stitches checked 6 days later and my GP said they were probably infected internally. I looked for the first time and cried in horror. It was worse than I had anticipated. My GP gave me antibiotics and an antibiotic cream. Problem solved or so I thought. I then saw the pelvic physio and she said everything looked great! I wouldn't let her touch me but I was so hopeful when she said this that I was going to be ok.

Perfect, I thought, now I'm on the road to recovery!

Months later... I was still in pain. My episiotomy scar could barely be touched. Everything apparently "looked" pretty normal. But I felt far from normal inside my body. I couldn't relax my vagina and when I did I had an awful heavy feeling and it felt like there was a tampon stuck inside my vagina.

My journey then begun... the recovery journey of endless appointments. I emailed the hospital asking for any suggestions of external help. They said they would pass on the email, but I never heard anything after that.

I saw my GP. She said I had "a little bit" of prolapse, vulvadynia and my pelvic floor was too tight. I then saw a highly recommended gynecologist, he said the scar had healed well, there was no prolapse and agreed I had a hypertonic pelvic floor and scar tissue.

Still though, I felt it was more than that. Both of these doctors examined me laying down, not standing. It is when standing that most of my symptoms become more obvious.

I needed more answers so I saw another pelvic physio who I finally let examine me internally both laying down and standing. She said my problem was that I was holding my pelvic floor too tight because of the heaviness of my prolapses. She said that my cervix was low (stage 2 uterine prolapse) and that I had stage 1 (cystocele) prolapse.

I was devastated, angry, confused and upset. I felt as though my body had let me down.

My pelvic physio suggested that I do pelvic wand release and scar massage every night. I could barely touch my own scar at this point so it was upsetting having to get touched all the time and sometimes I had to be sedated.

The internal release and massage hurt a lot and after months of this, I was now 9 months postpartum and still in pain.

I saw another pelvic physio to confirm that my cervix was lower than it should be and that I had a cystocele too (bladder prolapse). So despite multiple different diagnoses; I felt I did have prolapse. That's why I still had a feeling of heaviness. It was explained to me by this pelvic physio, that my pelvic floor was too tight in some places, but then it was damaged in other places from the forceps and therefore weak in some places hence my uterus (and cervix) and bladder are lower than they once were.

I was determined to do what I could to improve my pain and symptoms. At this point it has turned into chronic pain, I was seeing a chiro and I was also prescribed endep for the pain. I was reluctant to start meds so I asked a new gynaecologist what else I could try. It was suggested that I try Botox in the parts of my pelvic floor that were hypertonic. So I was sedated and had \$1200 of Botox injected in my pelvic floor. None of this was covered by health insurance or Medicare.

It worked to some extent and relieved me of the pain in my pelvic floor. It did relax the muscles but now I had a heaviness feeling all the time now and it wore off after a couple of months.

I also tried the Emsella chair (another thousand dollars). I didn't notice any changes.

I didn't exercise or even walk much for about 2 years, as the heaviness in my vagina felt so awful and reminded me of what had happened. The feeling of tightness and heaviness in my vagina is still to this day worse when standing. I feel like my body has forgotten what to do. I just can't relax my pelvic floor without it being a conscious decision. I have to actively relax it with my mind and then it feels heavy and uncomfortable. I go about my day but it always re tightens, like it's trying to push back all my organs where they used to be.

I became obsessed with feeling how low my cervix is and looking in the mirror to see the bulge at the entrance of my vagina had magically disappeared.

I was told by every Dr and Physio I saw that the 3 options for women are: pelvic floor exercises, pessaries and surgeries with high failure rates.

Because I'm hypertonic, more pelvic floor exercises make me worse and more sore.

2 years later I finally overcame my fear of inserting a pessary (and taking it out), but wearing it for too long kept giving me urinary tract infections.

I now just wear it for workouts. So at least now I can workout here and there. Sometimes I still get urinary tract infections, but it's better than not being able to workout at all. I felt like the pessary gives me more support when lifting light weights (even just psychologically). I live in fear that my ligaments are weak and I will prolapse more. I think about it everyday. I am so much less active than I used to be and I lay down a lot more as I notice the heaviness less when I'm laying down.

The incontinence improved but I do sometimes have an urgency that comes all of a sudden and I struggle to make it to the bathroom on time. I am also triggered by the word "push". I feel I can't push a stool out anymore which is very annoying. I feel a heaviness in my vagina when I need to poop and it's not even worse when I push, so instead I have to make sure I have a lot of fibre and I use a squatty potty so that I don't have to push.

The toll of my trauma is immense and affects me everyday. At one point I just wanted my uterus to be taken out. I was so devastated that my uterus had prolapsed and my cervix was so much lower than it used to be which causes me significant pain during sex.

Psychologically I was so fearful or making things worse that I didn't even want to hold my baby standing. I felt so sad. I read that if the uterus is removed; then everything else can prolapse. It was and still is at times a very depressing realisation.

I would absolutely love to have another baby, but I don't know if I ever will. Even with a c section, the weight of the baby on my pelvic floor petrifies me. I already feel the heaviness and discomfort in my vagina when I lift anything that's too heavy. I don't think I could put myself through it all again. I regret everyday not having a c section as I believe the forceps did more damage than a c section ever would or could have. I wish so badly I had asked for one. Why didn't I ask? Because I went through the public health system and thought I didn't have/ didn't have that option? I am so remorseful that I did not go private and chose to go public. I think I would have requested a c section had I gone private and would have avoided the mess made to my pelvic floor. As a public school teacher, I naively believed in the public hospital system. I will now always choose private care because I blame myself for not choosing it the first time. Before my epidural, when I was fully dilated, unable to move and not progressing, I feel like that was when I should have had a c section.

I have to accept that it all turned out this way and I have to be grateful my baby and I survived.

My marriage is not the same. It's been a very slow and painful road in trying to be intimate again. My husband had a hard time understanding how I would cry and pull away. He said I was acting like someone who had been raped. In a way it's like I was. Raped by intervention. Now having to show my most intimate and painful area of my body to the many many drs and physios. 3 years later I still have a lot less sensation and no sex drive.

It still doesn't feel "normal" inside and I doubt it ever will.

I have urodynamic testing coming up to see what is really going on with my bladder and to also see if I possibly have a pelvic floor avulsion. I hope the news is positive and maybe then I could even consider having another baby. Psychologically and physically though, I just don't know if I can go through it again.

I get sad when I see others planning to have their next baby. I grieve that I can't make that decision easily. I've been diagnosed with PTSD from the birth and hearing birth stories really triggers me. I sometimes have flashbacks and I still have dreams.

The saddest dream I had was a birth when I didn't need any interventions. It was a beautiful birth. The birth I wanted. This dream made me feel worse than any of the nightmares. Because it's what I wanted so badly, but never got.

I was not prepared for this and now prolapse is something I face daily. It has cost me thousands of dollars and I haven't even had any surgeries yet. More than any money though, it's cost me a lot of my happiness. I struggle with my physical and mental health as a consequence of the trauma.

Writing this was a big deal for me. I had only written the poem below, but this is my whole story. I hope it makes some sort of difference.