

Submission
No 741

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

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Partially
Confidential

I have been trying to write this submission for a while now, but every time I sit down to do it, I feel sick to my stomach. This is just one way that the trauma shows itself, even four years later.

I had gestational hypertension throughout my pregnancy with my first son in 2019. It was borderline the whole time and controlled by medication, but the doctors at Public Hospital immediately took it as a reason to push for an induction prior to full term. I have since learned in subsequent pregnancies that it is something my body does as I approach my 'due date', but I do not have chronic hypertension.

I had done my research and knew about the cascade of interventions, and raised this with the obstetrician Dr I said "I don't want an induction because of the risk of the cascade of interventions" and she said "if you don't have an induction, then there is a risk your baby will die." She said it bluntly and casually, as if she was ordering a drink at a café. She was clearly used to using this type of coercive language, and I realised that this is a person who has no respect for women or pregnancy and should not be working in this profession. Prior to this, I had pushed back against the induction and said I would come in for more regular monitoring instead, but as a first time mother, I found it very hard to resist the pressures of the medical professionals. When the societal narrative teaches us that they "know best", it is very hard to not only tap into your own intuition, but also trust it. My intuition (and research!) had told me that I should wait for spontaneous labour, but the doctors were telling me my baby could die.

My body was absolutely not ready for labour, and the midwife who administered my first dose of Cervadil knew this. She was a truly lovely person, but she said "when they give you the next dose tell them to go slowly" and in hindsight this tells me that she knew the first dose wasn't going to work. Over four days, I had 2 doses of cervadil, the balloon catheter, artificial rupture of membranes, and finally the syntocinon drip. I laboured for 10 hours before they called 'failure to progress'. Over these 4 days, I did not sleep at all, and by the end of it all I was totally wrecked physically, emotionally, and psychologically. When they came in and asked me to sign the paperwork for caesarean, I was sobbing because I genuinely believed I was going to die during surgery and never meet my son.

When I got to the theatre to have the spinal, the anaesthesiologist loudly made a bet with one of the nurses that he would be able to get the spinal in first go. After he got the spinal in, he asked me my weight and I told him because I thought it might be necessary for him to get the dose correct. He repeated my weight to the entire room and said that he was still able to get the spinal in on someone who weighed as much as me. I was humiliated.

Not once did I feel like I was a person who mattered in that room. No one told me what was going on, they began the surgery without telling me, they did not communicate anything to me at all. When my son was born, I burst into tears and the anaesthesiologist interrupted the moment and asked me why I was crying.

The surgeon did not speak to me at all, except at the end when he finished stitching me up and said that I would be able to wear a bikini in no time. This was clearly a joke at my expense, because of my weight and because of society's views of overweight women, we obviously don't wear bikinis. I said "yeah, right" in a sarcastic tone because of this, and everyone laughed.

I was separated from my baby unnecessarily and my husband had taken him to get his checks, so I was left alone with all the medical staff. As the surgeon was stitching me up, everyone was just talking about their weekend plans and I was just a body on the table. I felt like I was losing my mind, and the only thing I could do to keep my sanity was sing songs to myself to stay connected to my body. When I was finally wheeled to my room and my son was brought to me, I held my hands out for him and panted like an animal, because my humanity had systematically been stripped from me. I barely put my son down for the next 12 months. I was so terrified he would be taken from me. I had insomnia, I was hypervigilant, when I could actually sleep I had recurrent nightmares that he was taken from me or murdered. I would spend every night staring at his chest, making sure he was still breathing. I had postpartum anxiety and PTSD.

For my second birth, I intended a homebirth and hired a private midwife and doula because I knew I could not safely step foot back in a hospital. I went into preterm labour at 36 weeks however and had to present to hospital. I was terrified to be there, but eventually my labour took over my fear. I was in the very same room that I had 'failed to progress' with my first son, and decided to reclaim it as a place of victory. I achieved my VBAC, despite doctors coming in interrupting my labour to tell me that there was a risk my baby could die. My labour and birth with my second son was powerful, and it made me love giving birth. However, my treatment after his birth was abhorrent. Two doctors came in to assess my tear, and again treated me like a body on the table, not a person. They used a speculum on me, when I had literally just pushed an entire person out of my vagina. They were obscenely rough with their treatment of my body, and it was only after the midwife told them loudly that I had asked them to stop that they actually acknowledged me. Again, I ended up in theatre with a spinal block so they could repair my tear. The pain from the assessing my tear was far worse than the pain of labour.

I will never willingly step foot back in that hospital as a patient. I had a HBAC with my third birth, and it was the best experience of my life. Every woman deserves access to the gold standard of care – continuity of care with a known midwife.