

Submission
No 742

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

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Partially
Confidential

I lost a baby at 23 weeks in 2020. It was a devastating occurrence but I was beautifully taken care of by the team at the public hospital. It was mine and my partner's decision to have another baby to complete our family and I was lucky to fall pregnant soon after being given the green light.

Within the short amount of time between losing my son and becoming pregnant, the head of obstetrics at the local rural hospital had left for a secondment and it was a constant rotation of locums that took his place. I needed a huge level of support for my pregnancy and I was promised this level of support by that obstetrician, but since he was no longer there, the level of support from the hospital, particularly in terms of obstetrics, came up very short.

Due to the lack of consistency I was having to constantly re-explain my situation to new obstetricians, repeatedly going through the trauma of the loss of my son. I was placed on aspirin for preventative measures and had to tell my dosage to each new obstetrician and I felt that no one was truly checking in or monitoring me on this medication or particularly interested in how my mental health was, one obstetrician even telling me "not to worry".

I had a wonderful midwife who personally took on my case and tried to give me a sense of consistency during my pregnancy and I am truly grateful to her for doing her absolute best.

I struggled with my mental health during the pregnancy and lived in a constant state of anxiety from relatively early on. I was so terrified of losing my baby and despite knowing in my head that my fear was irrational and that it was highly unlikely that I would, it was a trauma, almost to a level of PTSD that I was deeply struggling with.

During the time it was hard to see things from an objective point of view, but in hindsight and looking back on the situation, I felt that there were many warning signs that my mental health was deteriorating during the pregnancy. I was losing weight rapidly, I had become withdrawn from society and was finding little to no pleasure in life. I was presenting regularly to the maternity unit at hospital for regular monitoring of the baby's movements and there were multiple occasions where I literally begged to be given a bed in the hospital because I felt as though the weight of the responsibility of my pregnancy and the (highly unlikely) possibility of losing another baby was too much for me to handle mentally. I was offered an in-hospital visit from a social worker during one of my presentations, however at no stage was I seen to or properly assessed by an obstetrician unless I had a physical problem. To try and have more consistency, I paid to see a local private obstetrician, despite not being able to afford it, once every few weeks, however it was of little comfort as it felt disjointed and wasn't cohesive with the public care I was receiving..

The midwives were so busy and I did not begrudge them in the slightest, however I could tell a handful of them were becoming frustrated with me constantly showing up for monitoring and support which they didn't really have the capacity or the resources to give. I was aware of the situation but felt trapped and this in turn really added to my poor mental state. At no point was I offered the service of a psychologist or psychiatrist for a proper mental health review, I was essentially prescribed valium and temazepam (for severe insomnia) and told that it would all be over soon and I would feel better once the baby was out.

I was induced at 38 weeks which was a huge difference to my natural birth in 2017 with my eldest daughter. I was scared and mentally and physically exhausted from battling months and months of anxiety and insomnia. As contractions amped up I was feeling so unsafe within my mental state I remember thinking I may die and not physically survive giving birth. I had no fuel in the tank and it took every last ounce of my energy to get to and through the pushing stage and be able to give birth.

Fortunately, my birth went smoothly on a physical level and with the help of an epidural I gave birth in the early hours of the morning. I did manage to experience the initial rush of birthing hormones and was so relieved and happy my daughter had arrived safely.

At 7 am, I asked the midwife if she could put me in a quiet room and I knew I desperately needed some sleep and I knew being a busy maternity ward it would be pretty noisy. I was told I had to deal with where I was put as they have a special order of beds and unfortunately I was placed right outside the reception station. I Struggled to sleep with the noise in the nurses station and then again in the night it was just as noisy, so I didn't manage to sleep that evening either. This left me barely functioning on the back of 3 sleepless nights.

Sadly, the oxytocin rush was short lived and I knew I was still very mentally unwell, feeling an intense feeling of depression post birth. I didn't feel a connection to my baby, I couldn't eat food and didn't even feel interested in seeing my oldest child (who I had never felt that way about her or anyone else I loved before). I tried to voice this to a couple of different midwives and they were friendly, but I was essentially told to find a doctor and make an appointment at my earliest convenience. No one asked me about my sleep or offered to care for the baby for a few hours so I could attempt to get some sleep. I wasn't offered to be seen by any doctors or obstetricians, just was paid a visit by a social worker who sadly was kind, but again very unhelpful. I thought my only option was to go home which would be more restful, but sadly, going home and being left alone with the baby and my eldest daughter while my husband had to go to work exacerbated the situation and my mental state worsened.

I continued to deteriorate, presenting to emergency twice and ended up spending a small amount of time in psychiatric care without my baby and then moved on to private hospital mother and baby unit for 3 weeks, which I managed to get into thanks to my private health care. The postpartum story goes on but in conclusion, I wonder if the antenatal and birthing care had been more supportive, then maybe my mental health wouldn't have suffered as much as it did. I am eternally grateful that my birth was physically successful, however, physical health with birth is only a small portion of the whole picture and I truly believe that mental support for pregnant women, particularly those who have suffered loss or stillbirth, needs to be reviewed and revised.

I am stronger today for my experience and I wouldn't trade my beautiful daughter for the world, as she is the sunshine of my life, but it is a shame to think my experience could have been vastly different, and perhaps something I wouldn't have had to go through with if the right amount of care and resources were in place.