

Submission
No 768

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

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Partially
Confidential

I had an 'emergency' c-section at [redacted] in 2015 due to 'failure to progress'.

The midwife failed to pick up that my daughter was a posterior presentation, which meant that my labour was very hard going. Even after multiple vaginal examinations she didn't say anything about posterior labour.

Eventually, she told me that by this stage I should have progressed further and that I had to go to the labour ward for an epidural. It wasn't really a discussion; I was just told that it should happen. I felt like I was inconveniencing them by taking so long.

I didn't feel supported by her and I was absolutely devastated - like I'd failed at birthing. I sobbed all the way from the birth centre to the labour ward.

They gave me an epidural and put me on a syntocinon drip to speed up labour. After about eight hours, the obstetrician told me that a c-section was the best option, even though my cervix was at 9cm. He didn't push me but there were no other options put on the table. I consented because I felt like I had to.

During the surgery, everything went fine; my daughter's APGAR was 9 and she entered the world by pooping on the surgeon! (A very apt beginning for a kid who now loves fart and poop jokes!)

After they'd delivered the placenta, the surgeon started stitching everything back together. At that point the epidural failed and I could feel everything - the wound, the doctor's hands rummaging around inside my abdomen, everything. It was excruciating and terrifying. I've never been so frightened in my life.

My memory of it is a bit confused because trauma changes how your brain lays down memories, but as I recall it, the anaesthetist had stepped away for a moment and the surgeon was chatting with the other staff about their weekends. I feel like it took a bit of time for me to get their attention, and maybe I was in shock so didn't speak up immediately? I'm not sure. But I felt so terrified and so alone. You know those dreams where you're trying to shout but no sound comes out? It felt a bit like that - like I was trying to call out to tell them I could feel everything but I couldn't get the sound out. I felt completely powerless.

They sorted the epidural quickly (so I'm told - it felt like forever for me), but shortly thereafter I had a bleed (about 900mL, but I'm only 157cm and weighed about 52kg before pregnancy), and my blood pressure crashed. They had to give me some medication (I don't know what it was) and it made me feel really dizzy - like I was going to fall off the bed/trolley. I had to ask my child's father to take the baby because I thought I was going to drop her.

I felt really out of it the whole time I was in recovery, and I was still in a daze by the time I got up to the maternity ward. There were so many people prodding me and talking at me and grabbing at my breasts, shoving the baby's face at my nipple to try to get her to latch. It was

overwhelming and I just felt like a lump of meat being pushed around, and like I was fucking up breastfeeding.

I spent the whole first night of my daughter's life thinking that they'd given me the wrong baby and that they'd come and take her away from me. I didn't know where my baby was, but I felt like I was going to be left without a baby. It was so confusing and distressing.

The next day there were more people prodding me, grabbing at my breasts and shoving a huge maternity pad between my legs. I still didn't have any feeling or movement in my legs so it was really strange - once again I felt like a lump of meat.

I can't remember what day it was, but I finally got up to have a shower. I was unsteady on my feet and a nurse stayed with me to make sure I didn't fall. My calves had swelled up so much I didn't recognise them as my own legs.

I felt dizzy and lightheaded whenever I tried to walk, but I felt like I needed to move to get the swelling to go down.

We'd been warned about the 'feeding frenzy' that happens on the second night (I think). A nurse came in and told me that my child's father would take the baby so I could get some sleep. She literally milked me to get some colostrum into a syringe for him to feed the baby, and then sent him and the baby out of the room. I wasn't consulted about this, and if I had been I would've wanted my baby to stay with me - in retrospect it doesn't make sense to send her away when I needed her trying to feed to help my milk come in.

The next day, a young nurse gave me some tips for getting my baby to latch. She actually asked if she could touch my breasts - she was the only person who did. She was kind and patient and gentle with me, and I nearly cried because every other nurse had been brisk and acted like I was an inconvenience who was wasting their time.

We went home that day because I couldn't bare to stay in the hospital any longer. They sent a midwife out to check on us a few times afterwards and she was lovely.

I felt lightheaded and dizzy whenever I'd go for a walk for about a week after the birth.

Everyone kept telling me that I was lucky to have a healthy baby and I didn't feel like I could explain how shell-shocked I was. I just tried to get on with things.

Whenever we'd drive near _____ I'd start to feel panicky and dissociated. This continued for months and months after my daughter was born.

After initially being misdiagnosed with postnatal depression, I was finally diagnosed with PTSD, given medication and sent to a psychologist who did EMDR. It helped somewhat but even now I still start dissociating and feel panicky if someone so much as mentions the word

"anaesthetist", "anaesthetic" or "c-section". Conversations about birth make me feel numb and I just put on a pleasant face and try to keep it together.

I had previously wanted to have two children, but after the trauma of my daughter's birth I just couldn't even contemplate it. The thought of going back into a hospital terrified me. I initially looked into VBAC and felt like maybe that would be an empowering experience, but the second I realised that it might end in a c-section again I knew I couldn't do it. I couldn't go through that again - it would completely break me. Even that one experience feels like it broke me.

Eventually my GP asked for the hospital to send their notes from my birth. There was no mention whatsoever of the epidural failure. I shouldn't have been surprised - I doubt they would've put that fuck-up in writing. But it was so invalidating. There have been lots of times where I've wondered if I imagined the whole thing. But the trauma remains.

I'm still frightened whenever I have to go into a hospital. Fortunately I haven't had to go back to [redacted] but even at other hospitals I'm anxious and dissociated.

Even after years of therapy, I still don't think I'll get over the trauma. It's taken a horrific toll on my mental health and I feel like it robbed me of the opportunity to decide whether to have a second child or not - the fear of being in that situation again meant that I just couldn't do it.

I know it was just a blip on the doctors' days and they probably haven't given it a second thought, but it changed me irrevocably.