

Submission
No 771

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

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Partially
Confidential

To the Select Committee on Birth Trauma.

Earlier this year my three and a half year old boy was in the bush with my dad, tripped, caught his foot and broke his femur.

About thirty hours after the accident [redacted] was taken into theatre to have the leg set. He's very attached to me so I went too, and thought nothing of it. As we entered the theatre environment I began to be aware I was having trouble, but I was able to firmly focus on him until he was out cold. As I left the theatre and met the nurse companion to take me to the waiting area, my mind decided it would take a break and wander off. I pulled it back and chatted to the companion. Then I had a panic attack, which was unexpected but we got that under control and began to walk, then my mind wanted to wander off and I pulled it back again. I can't express the extraordinary effort it took to bring it back each time. The third time I couldn't do it and I let go, and collapsed. I was still present, but I couldn't hold my head up or my body. They put me on a bed and took me into recovery. Two anaesthetists checked me over and there was nothing unusual about my stats. I was tucked up in a corner, the nurses fetched my husband and my baby from upstairs, and they fed me tea and apples while we waited for [redacted] to come out of theatre and wake up.

We've had wonderful care from orthopaedics at [redacted] and after six weeks in a full body cast and the fortnight after with a bad limp he's now up and about and as active as usual, and I don't think you'd pick the injury if you didn't know.

[redacted] was my first birth and he was delivered by trial forceps (forceps in theatre). In speaking with my local mental health team in the last month, they've explained I collapsed because I dissociated after being in the theatre environment. This means my body and mind identified this environment as being so unsafe that they took extraordinary steps to remove me from the situation.

Last year (2022) when I was unexpectedly pregnant with my second child, I wrote a poem. My care was public caseload, I was five months along, on work holidays and I'd just had a second midwife say they wouldn't talk the previous birth through or make plans for the upcoming birth until later in the pregnancy. I was suffering, and wrote as a way to ease my situation. It doesn't give medical details but perhaps conveys the effect of [redacted] birth better than medical facts or a recount could.

Untitled 1

I'm trying to recover
from this idea

that birth is hell
Except it's not an idea
it's my experience,
or part of it.

How do you stand fresh
and say
maybe this is new?

It's bravery I guess,
courage,
maybe.
Honest.

It is said
the enemy
didn't want him born
and I understand that
But I don't want to believe
evil had the say

And I need
my God to stand for me
And He did
though perhaps through the hidden
didn't happens
rather than the did?
Both I guess.

And through the sirens
and the people
swarming like ants

came a 90kg man

who
pulled him out of me in two reefs
like a mechanic
on a rusted bolt.
I love that man for our lives
and I hate him
for my injuries
But it is
What it is
and it can't be changed.

There's a vulnerability
in birth.
An inability
to advocate

And through it all
you know
what matters?
what stuck?

The kindness and the petty.

The midwife
who crouched under the bed
to get readings on my belly
so my labouring focus
wasn't disturbed.

Another midwife
who said
If you must
every time I asked
to push

a different way.

The gowned woman under the lights,
when asked to do
who said,
the patient asked me to stay with her
because I had,
I'd pleaded don't leave me
And even though
she was told to let me go
she'd tried and that's all that mattered.

And finally
at the end
the tattooed bandanna-d accented
unimportant little man
who pushed my bed
after they
took
my baby
and left me in a room with a nurse
who wouldn't talk
And he said
are you okay
and I'm forever grateful

And I have no memory after that.

Now in me grows
a God given little life
and I'm thrilled
and I'm scared
and I know He gave
me the strength with the task

in my
Weakness.

And what I want more than anything
Is a group of women around me
who will help me birth
this life into the
World
in simple trust and honesty
wisdom and intuition
with kindness love and knowledge,
not professional curiosity.

I believed the things people say are right.
I went into the birth
fearless
fully believing my body was made for this
practiced
at pushing my limits of endurance
educated
determined
understanding of interventions
but Maybe deeply sure
they wouldn't apply to me.

And this time
I come humbled
unsure If I am made for this
And deeply rattled in my trust
that they will do best by me.
And a little bit rattled
in my Fixed Star too,
if I'm honest.

But so far
they're doing all they can
and I rest in
Hope
knowing however I feel it
(whether I feel it or not)
He will stand with me
For me and Through me.

This is a messy,
beautiful process
this one of
growing and giving
Life.

Helen Muller. 14/7/22

Our beautiful was born in November last year at 42+1, in a satisfying and fulfilling birth, after a day of labouring in public hospital with Pitocin induction, without instruments or pain relief, with my doula, my darling husband Brian, and my caseload midwife. After the birth and despite a small post partum haemorrhage I couldn't believe how well I was; that I could walk straight after birthing, I felt happy, I didn't cry whenever I was alone.

I believe the key difference between the births was the one to one care I received throughout the pregnancy and birth from our doula. It cost us \$2200 for her services and we've since paid it for one of my husband's colleagues too. It was her I rang when the midwife did a stretch and sweep when she knew I didn't want one, her who was with me while I laboured at home for six hours, eight days before was born (as soon as it was time to go to hospital the labour stopped utterly, in half an hour- it was extraordinary), her who cared for Brian when he was panicking internally in the labour room, her who held my hand after birth when it hurt while the obstetrician repeatedly put her whole hand in me to pull clots out as I bled after high dose Pitocin contractions all day.

A midwife is responsible for the health of the baby and meeting the requirements of her department. A doula is responsible to the woman. I will always be an advocate for doula care.

Since I collapsed after visiting the theatre the mental health team has said I ought to have EMDR treatment. Despite having a practitioner on their team and it being proven very effective there is no way for me to get this therapy unless I pay for it. When I eventually have it we can add this to the cost of two years of private physio so I am continent at work, and the loss of income from taking a second year of maternity leave because I couldn't see how I could go back to work (although maybe we should put that cost down to the effect of isolation during the lockdowns following birth).

Moving forward I believe the safest way for women to birth, and babies to be born, is in the home with qualified, registered midwives and a doula, and hospital transfer if medically necessary, or for pain relief.

While vaginal birth is a little like ageing in our society, (I think we need resilience with the idea that we are not going to be physically the same as we were before), and we have low infant mortality rates, I believe we have unacceptably high, perhaps hugely high, levels of women and children who are damaged from their births.

This can be lowered by encouraging doula care, and expanding public hospital programs that allow women to be attended by midwives while they birth at home. I like to imagine what it would be like to be cocooned in your home by people that know you (partner and doula), with expert baby and birthing care (midwives), who can tell you when it's time for top notch medical intervention (transfer to tertiary hospital). This is currently possible, but costs \$4-7000 for private midwives plus the \$2000 for a doula.

Please see the Netherlands system of care, and the British practice of reserving ambulances to service home births. Please also see www.birthisms.com.au/ for an example of excellence in doula care.

It's perhaps worth noting without names a couple of remarkable people. I had a birth review at the hospital in 2020 and the consultant midwife present gave me her mobile number and told me to call her as soon as I was pregnant again. That's how I got caseload midwifery care. She also told me to make sure to get a doula. After finding the caseload midwifery a bit unaware of what would be helpful for me (my midwife actively discouraged me getting a doula, etc), I asked to see the women's ward's psychologist. She was a great support and coordinated with the midwives as well as the local mental health team in my area. Post birth a lady from the team called for a twenty minute chat every three weeks, which was such helpful, flexible care.

I have found how I felt from the way some people treated me during birth to be more difficult than the medical damage. But as much as I've experienced dehumanising care, I have had some really extraordinarily good care too.

Untitled 2

Heavy and warm she was
Heavy, hot even
on my chest
after
the great effort.
I could feel it this time,
body spirit soul
(not like last time
Numb
as spirit guarded my soul off in the ether
while they did to me
the unsafe things.)
This time
Feeling,
this time,
hot, weighty,
the unaccountable wonder.
I can still feel it,
when I close my eyes.

And now
I watch her,
cheeks like the hugest blueberry,
smiles like the sweetest,
and joy that stains me with delight.

Helen Muller. 12/6/23

Physical injuries:

Birth 1-

Displaced vertebrae

Muscle torn off hip

Bowel prolapse

Soles of feet numb from half way along the foot to the heel

External first degree tear (six weeks, recovered)

Internal tearing- I don't know what degree this tearing was, but it went from the front, top and bottom, back to the cervix. The consultant on his rounds in the ward the next morning said, "we've had a vagina disaster", which seemed apt. They took a long time stitching, but I'd have to request the notes from the hospital to find out the degree of the tearing.

Insomnia (six months, recovered)

Pain and discomfort in episiotomy scar (two years, recovered)

No sexual sensation (six months, recovered)

Pain during intercourse (one year, recovered)

Birth 2-

Bladder prolapse, grade two

PPH 600mL (recovered)

Second degree tear external (four weeks, recovered).