

Submission
No 796

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

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Date Received: 8 August 2023

Partially
Confidential

In 2022/23 At 25 years old I had a planned pregnancy with my daughter. The pregnancy was very uneventful up until 30 weeks gestation, at which time I had an additional ultrasound performed by my women's health clinic. The ultrasound found incidentally that our daughter, who had been growing at a normal rate up until this point, was 3 weeks behind in all of her measurements. After further testing, she was diagnosed as small for gestational age, with no confirmed reason as to why.

For the last 7 weeks of my pregnancy I dutifully attended weekly CTGs and fortnightly ultrasounds between both [REDACTED] Hospital and my Women's Health Clinic. We were informed by both parties that we would be having an induction to ensure the safety of our daughter, meaning that my plans for a water birth would unfortunately not happen. There was disagreement between my women's health clinic and the hospital as to when the induction should occur - my clinic were performing the ultrasounds and they had advised they were happy with my daughter to stay in until 39 weeks. However, the hospital, interpreting the same results, advised that they were concerned and recommended induction at 37 weeks. My husband and I felt a lot of pressure from this decision, but ultimately decided to proceed with induction at 37 weeks.

Leading up to the birth, my husband and I did as much research as we could on what to expect. Having an induction meant that I would not experience the feeling of going into labour naturally, nor would I get to have the water birth I had been wanting. It made me nervous to think about medically forcing my body to do something it wasn't yet ready to do on its own. However, my husband and I still tried to go into the birth prepared and with open minds. Despite it not being how we imagined it, we were determined to make it a positive experience and were beyond excited to meet our little girl.

We were admitted to hospital to start our induction the night before our daughter's birth. I had a cooks catheter placed and we had a private room, meaning my husband could stay. Whilst a little uncomfortable I went to sleep that night feeling confident and excited for the day to come.

I was expected to have my catheter removed at 7 am the following morning, however bed and staff shortages meant that I was not taken through to the labour room until around lunch. In retrospect, this was the point in which the situation shifted from calm and controlled to chaotic and scary.

Upon cervical examination, I was found to only be 1 cm dilated with an unfavourable cervix. However, both doctor and midwife agreed on breaking my water regardless. I had researched breaking of waters and was informed of what tool they would be using, and had been told it would be painless. Instead, it was excruciatingly painful, with the doctor having to hold my legs down to the bed to stop me from moving due to the pain. The reason as to why they had chosen to proceed despite my cervix not being ready was not explained to me, and if I knew then what I know now I would have asked to wait.

After checking my daughter was ok via CTG, I was then started on a pitocin drop. We had talked with the midwife about what rate we would ideally like to work up to with the drip.

The increases started slow, however the midwife then suddenly doubled the rate instead of working up in increments like we had discussed. This brought about a massive acceleration in my labour, which resulted in early indications that my daughter was not coping. The doctor voiced her concerns and mentioned the possibility of a caesarean. We had previously stated that if a caesarean was required we wanted to go for it as soon as possible to keep our daughter safe. However, the midwife seemed to disagree with the doctors observations, and told me privately that the doctor was inexperienced and overly cautious and not to worry because there was nothing wrong with my baby.

Shortly after, the CTG lost contact with my daughter so a FSE was placed and the pitocin drip was turned completely off to slow things down. However my body proceeded with labour and I continued to labour unmedicated for another 3 hours. For most of this time, my husband and I were in the shower together, whilst the midwives were huddled around the monitor screen whispering and arguing about the results. This was quite frightening for my husband and I, as we felt very uninformed and isolated.

I decided that I wanted some pain relief, so asked the midwives if I could please have the morphine injection, as the gas and air had been making me vomit. The midwife advised that I would not be able to have morphine as there was concerns that I would need a caesarean. I then asked for an epidural, which was a last resort for me as I had fears surrounding epidurals due to my scoliosis (which I had made the staff aware of). The midwife informed me that I could have an epidural, but that the anaesthetist was an hour away. This was very distressing to me, as I had waited until I couldn't bear the pain anymore, as had been recommended in the birthing classes the hospital provided, and the thought of having to go through that pain for another hour was devastating. I continued to labour but my confidence was completely gone, especially as my husband and I were again left out of all discussions regarding our daughters wellbeing. Any plans for a calm and confident labour were well and truly gone.

Just prior to my next cervical check I spiked a fever and started vomiting. My daughter also now had significant increases in her resting heart rate. At this point it was decided that a caesarean was necessary. This was extremely hard for us to process, as the doctor had mentioned this right at the start of the labour, however only now was it happening after hours of pain and our daughter now experiencing serious fetal distress.

We were taken down to the surgical ward immediately. On the way into theatre I spoke with the anaesthetic nurse and anaesthetist. I mentioned to both that I had scoliosis and was concerned about the spinal block. Both dismissed my concerns by saying that I would be ok because I have a low BMI and that they do spinal blocks every day.

Despite my concerns, the anaesthetist let the resident attempt my spinal block, without asking me for my consent. I was still having contractions during the placement despite having had medication to stop them. I felt terrified knowing how important it was to sit perfectly still, whilst still having excruciating contractions. The initial placement was incorrect and resulted in shooting pain in my right hand side. I voiced that I was having pain. The anaesthetist then checked the residents placement and identified that it was in the wrong

spot due to my scoliosis. It was then replaced and I was told that the placement was “textbook”.

I was then laid down and prepared for surgery. The anaesthetist performed the ice test and I advised that I could still feel the ice on my stomach. I was dismissed and told that I was still meant to feel it “a little bit” but felt quite uneasy.

When the surgeons placed the towel clamps I could feel the pinching on my abdomen. I again voiced my concerns to the anaesthetist, saying that I could feel the towel clamps. We waited for a few more minutes for the drugs to kick in, then repeated the ice test, which I could still feel. The anaesthetist again dismissed my concerns and gave the surgeon the ok to proceed with the surgery.

I didn't feel the skin incision, however had excruciating pain as the surgeons began working on the subcutaneous and muscular incisions. I was crying out in pain and the anaesthetist again dismissed me, saying that feeling pressure was normal and offered me the gas mask. I felt like I was being ripped open, I could feel everything they were doing from just below my umbilicus upwards. When the gas still wasn't helping and I was still crying out, the anaesthetist then offered me a general anaesthetic, which I consented to. My husband was escorted from the room and I was immediately anaesthetised.

Now I was well informed prior to the procedure of the failure rates for spinal blocks and knew that given my scoliosis that this may be a possibility for me. However never in my scariest nightmares would I have imagined that an anaesthetist would give the go ahead on a surgery they weren't 100% certain their patient wouldn't feel. Never in all of my worries leading up to the birth would I have imagined, in the 21st century, having surgery performed on me that I could feel, despite my protests. That was the sort of thing, in my mind, that only happened in horror movies. As a veterinarian myself, I do not have the privilege of communicating directly with my patients, and as such it is my job to be a constant advocate for them and ensure that they don't experience pain associated with the surgeries and procedures I perform. It's hard for me to fathom how a medical professional can have a patient directly telling them that they can feel pain, and yet treat them as though that pain isn't real. And as a veterinarian, I know that no one is perfect all of the time and that unfortunate mistakes that have impacts on patients can happen. However, the lack of accountability and admission of fault by both the hospital and this individual has only made it harder for me to deal with.

My husband and I both missed the birth of our first daughter. We were later informed that she was born with an APGAR of 3, and required immediate intervention and oxygen support. At the time I was putting my full trust in the medical professionals, however it scares me so much now to think that the delays in the caesarean, the prolonged fetal distress and the general anaesthetic due to poor spinal block placement could have resulted in the loss of our baby. I went into the birth knowing that it was going to be quite full on, however I never imagined a possibility in which we wouldn't go home with our baby at the end of it.

I woke up in recovery on my own, on a different floor of the hospital than my husband and baby. I hadn't cried yet up until that point. The tears I was reserving for the birth of my

daughter were shed instead because I missed it. There was no delayed cord clamping, no breast crawl, no golden hour. All of these things I had been told were so important had not been allowed to happen. We didn't get to hear her first cry, nor did my husband get to cut her cord. The beautiful and intimate birth moment I had imagined sharing with my husband was instead replaced by the memory of being anaesthetised in excruciating pain as I felt surgeons ripping through my abdomen.

The anaesthetist came to see me before I was moved and was surprised to find that I could completely move my right leg. I felt as if even up until that point they still didn't believe that the block had at least partially failed.

I was taken down to the nursery to meet my daughter, still groggy from the anaesthetic. I had imagined that I would feel overwhelming joy when I finally got to see her, but instead I just felt numb. She had thick dark hair just like me, yet it was as though she belonged to someone else. I had gone to sleep pregnant and woken up no longer pregnant, and it was as if my body didn't recognise my daughter as my baby because I hadn't gotten to see her be delivered. By that point she had had most of the vernix wiped off of her and had already been held by my husband. Such small things, but they felt big because they had yet again been taken from me.

By God's grace, my daughter was doing well and was just big enough (by 200g) to sleep in my room. We were moved back to my room by midnight, only to be informed that our single room from the night before was gone. Instead, we were in a shared room, meaning my husband couldn't stay. So after everything we had been through that day, after only having 3 hours together, my husband was made to leave the hospital for the night. He was back the next morning the earliest they would let him in.

We stayed in the hospital for 3 nights, during which for the majority we had amazing support from the midwives. On the last night, however, when I needed help soothing my baby the midwife was extremely rude and told me that the woman in the other bed needed her sleep, so she was going to have to take my baby to the nursery if I couldn't calm her. I could hear my baby screaming from down the hallway, and I was left crying silently in my room. When we were offered to stay for another night the next day we decided instead to go home.

Despite all of her obstacles, my daughter has thrived, although our experience definitely took a toll on our initial bond. I found myself in the early days at times feeling quite detached from her and often preferred others to look after her, as I felt they could do a better job than I could. It took weeks for me to feel comfortable seeing my scar in the mirror - not because of what it looked like but because of the memories attached to it. I have since experienced multiple full body flash backs to the surgery, triggered in particular by fluorescent lighting and depictions of caesareans in media. I have been seeing a therapist to try and manage these triggers. Without the unwavering support of my family and the fantastic resources I have had access to at my women's health clinic, my postpartum journey definitely would've been a lot more difficult as a result. But this experience has made me seriously consider whether I want more children in the future, which is something I wouldn't have thought twice about previously.

I went into the birth feeling well educated and prepared of what I was facing. I knew it was going to be invasive and I knew I was going to have to endure things that I wasn't comfortable with. However, seeing my daughter be born was supposed to make it all worthwhile, to erase it all. For a long time, it was hard for me to accept the fact that that moment was taken away by people I put my whole trust in. Now, I'm just grateful to have her here safe and healthy. I've let go of the memories I missed and am instead focussing on making new ones with my family.