

**Submission  
No 814**

## **INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA**

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Subject: Submission on Birth Trauma

AUGUST 07 2023

Dear Members of the Committee,

I am writing to share my personal experiences and perspectives on behalf of women who have encountered birth trauma. As a woman who has personally experienced birth trauma I hope to shed light on the impact it can have on individuals and families.

I, Jessica Nash, have experienced birth trauma firsthand, and as a Birth Doula, have witnessed and supported clients who have experienced birth trauma.

The specifics of my own encounter with birth trauma are as follows:

During my first pregnancy, my GP insisted I needed vaginal examinations at every single prenatal appointment. I questioned why and was simply told they needed to be done to see that everything was progressing. I reluctantly agreed, because I was young and had trusted this Dr throughout my childhood. This Dr was also aware of my history of childhood sexual abuse, and should have understood that I was not comfortable having vaginal examinations. He still insisted they needed to be done. It was not until my second pregnancy, when I changed Drs and asked my new practitioner at what point would we need to begin the vaginal examinations, her confused look on her face made me realise I had in a way, been violated again. She told me there was absolutely no need to have routine vaginal examinations during a healthy pregnancy and she couldn't understand why my previous Dr had insisted upon performing them.

My first labour was induced. I agreed to have prostaglandin gel administered, but the Doctor also forcibly 'pulled' my cervix, without my consent, nor with any warning. This was incredibly painful, and I was already in a heightened emotional state due to the history of sexual trauma.

My labour began soon after, and the pain was unbearable, with absolutely no pause. I was completely dismissed by the midwife on duty, and when my mother queried if something was going wrong, the midwife told her "She's young, she's just overreacting, she's not even in labour yet."

The pain would not end and I was eventually told to "just go to the delivery suite, you're distressing the other women on the ward with all your carrying on!"

In the delivery suite, the midwife gave me nitrous oxide and offered to bring me some ice, and then left the room. After some time, I asked my husband 'wasn't she going to bring ice?!' so he went to find out where it was. I then learned it had been over 2 hours since she'd offered it, meaning we'd been alone all this time. At this time pethidine was administered as the pain was simply excruciating, although it didn't appear to help. I was in absolute agony. I've never felt anything like it in my life. I felt I was being torn apart inside, and the idea that this wasn't

even labour, and that things were going to get worse before my baby was born, was simply overwhelming. I truly thought I would die. All this time I'd been laying on the bed, unable to move, crying and yelling in pain. I had the realisation that I needed this to end NOW. I sat up suddenly and started looking around the room. My husband asked what I needed and I told him I needed something sharp so I could cut my baby out of me. That's how badly I wanted this pain to end, I was willing to give myself a cesarean without anaesthesia.

My husband ran from the room and demanded the midwife check on me. As she ran in she screamed for a Dr because she could see my baby coming out of my vagina. "Oh you really were in labour!" is what she declared. How bloody patronising.

We later learned I'd essentially had an allergic reaction to the gel, causing uterine hyperstimulation - where the uterus contracts incessantly. This posed a very real risk to mine and my son's life, yet we were completely dismissed, left alone, and in complete agony.

I recovered physically, but mentally and emotionally I was a wreck for years to come. I developed tokophobia, which is the fear of childbirth. Even seeing a fake birth on TV or in a movie would cause a panic attack. I could not even think about my son's birth without shaking, crying and breaking out in a sweat. It was made worse by no one ever validating how scary that experience was for myself or my husband. We were told "Oh well, you have a healthy baby and that's all that matters."

After intense therapy, I conceived our second child, and felt confident about his birth.

This experience was much better, although we did end up with a midwife who was not comfortable with me birthing in my preferred (upright) position, and made threats until I lay down as she wanted. I then tore, which I know is a direct result of birthing in the position she insisted upon.

My son was also born with a multiple nuchal cord, something else she was not comfortable with. She held him upside down by his feet, immediately unlooped and cut the cord (absolutely no need to do this as he was already born), and ran out of the room with him, where I believe resuscitation and suction was performed. We could hear our baby screaming in the next room and had no idea what was happening. With my knowledge and experience, I know this was not warranted, and if anything caused unnecessary trauma for my son.

Apart from my own experience, I have seen multiple accounts of actions that caused 'birth trauma' to my clients as a Birth Doula.

I have had to stop an Ob from cutting a perineum without consent.

I have had to ask 8 staff to leave the room, who had been standing next to the bedside, loudly laughing and joking about their weekend plans, while the birthing woman was fighting off an anxiety attack and pushing a baby out of her body.

I have supported women who've had their concerns laughed at or completely dismissed.

I have heard the 'dead baby' card played more times than I can count.

I have witnessed a whole fist inserted into a vagina without consent.

I have witnessed fingers being inserted into an anus, again without consent.

I have seen vulvas torn from the clitoris to the anus, due to forced pushing.

And in the most extreme case, I have witnessed the death of a baby, due to medical negligence and abuse. The mother of this child also received extensive physical trauma due to the overuse of ventouse, and required multiple surgeries to repair the damage to her vagina, vulva, perineum, bowel and anus.

I'm not naive enough to think we can prevent all instances of birth trauma from ever occurring, because birth is a random, messy, emotional, and at times, complicated experience.

But we absolutely have to do better.

Let's get normal healthy birth outside of the hospital system. Let's encourage homebirth with trained midwives. Let's open more birth centres and low risk birthing hospitals. Let's leave obstetrics for the women who truly need it.

Let's get all care providers trained with trauma-informed care practices.

Let's remind them that the individual birthing woman is the expert when it comes to her birthing choices. No one knows her body better than her. Remind them to listen to her, to validate her, to reassure rather than patronise her.

And let's provide better follow up support for those who have experienced trauma.

Thank you for considering my submission. I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute my experiences and viewpoints to the committee's ongoing inquiry.

With sincere appreciation,

Jessica Nash