

Submission  
No 819

## INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

**Name:** Ms Peta Gormly

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Partially  
Confidential

To whom it may concern:

My name is Peta, I am 34 and live in Sydney. I have 2 children aged 3 years and 3 months. I had 2 very different birthing experiences. I continue to see a perinatal psychologist as I experience PTSD caused by the birth experience I had with my first child.

I am writing about my experiences as a patient in the birthing unit at \_\_\_\_\_ Hospital as a first-time mother. I would like you to take this feedback and ensure no other mother or family has the same experience.

I was subjected to medical gaslighting during my antenatal appointments where I was repeatedly questioned by a doctor if I was a drug user because of my low weight, and how I felt, and my symptoms were downplayed. I weighed 42kg at 16 weeks pregnant as I was throwing up everything I ate. Luckily, I was already working from home in October 2019 as I was so unwell, otherwise I would have suffered financially. When I went to my first antenatal appointment, and I asked for help because I couldn't eat, and I was getting migraines. As my vitals did not show distress or signs of dehydration I was met with disbelief. I was finally believed and diagnosed with Hyperemesis Gravidarum and was given a treatment plan that saw a huge improvement in my weight and health. At my follow up appointment, the week after, a doctor continuously questioned if I was sure I wasn't a drug user. I have always been a naturally small build and being unwell did not help. This was the beginning of being disbelieved.

5 days before I gave birth I started experiencing labour pains and I was unable to go to the toilet. I went to \_\_\_\_\_ Hospital to be checked. I was advised I was 2cm dilated. They did a stretch and sweep. I was asked consent but I was not informed of the pros and cons of the procedure. I was scared and agreed to it. If presented with the situation again I would decline it.

I was admitted to \_\_\_\_\_ Hospital on 16/5/2020 and gave birth to a daughter the following day at 16:31. My established labour extended for approximately 10.5 hours presented a number of minor complications, and culminated in the delivery of a healthy daughter who was heavier than expected.

My experience is one I will not share with expecting mothers or those wishing to have a family in the future as I do not wish to spread fear and anxiety. Being a first-time mother, you experience fear due to many unknowns. It is expected that you would be treated with compassion from health professionals.

My husband called the birthing unit to describe the state I was in as I was in a lot of pain. They refused to speak to him despite being authorised to speak on my behalf. I got on the phone. I understood the need to give accurate and concise information so I spoke calmly and clearly. I was told I was not in enough pain because I could speak. I had to speak as they would not speak to my husband. I was told to have a bath. The pain increased so I decided to go to hospital, thinking I would be looked after.

That night on the 16/5/2020 I went to the birthing unit. I advised that morphine didn't work on me, I would get a bronchospasm and that my pain gets worse. I was ignored and was given an injection of morphine. My husband had to hold me up as my chest felt crushed and I couldn't express myself. I was then taken to another room out of the birthing unit. A doctor came into my room and asked how I felt as he read the notes made by an anaesthetist I made an appointment with prior to ensure my pain would be managed. The doctor said I should not have had the morphine as I was contraindicated to the medication. I told him the pain had not been helped. I was taken back to the birthing unit and given gas.

I was looked after by a very compassionate and dedicated midwife for most of the day on the 17/5/2023. There was a shift change just as I started active labour. This is where my birth experience changed. Contractions were extremely painful and I had been using gas and had an epidural to manage the pain. This had been successful throughout the day. When active labour started the pain increased so significantly I was unable to physically follow the instructions from the midwives. I repeatedly said I was unable to push because the pain was so unbearable. My pain appeared to be ignored because I was able to speak during the contractions. This is a terrible way to gauge someone's pain. When you are in pain you will find a way to express that. My husband was actively ignored and was told to leave the room. He stayed with me to advocate for me.

After 2 hours of the most excruciating pain I have experienced and no progress with the birth, doctors arrived to perform an instrument delivery. My pain continued to be ignored, and I repeatedly said I could not follow their instructions, not due to a lack of understanding but the pain was so bad. I was yelled at by the doctor saying I had a choice, to push or have forceps. I said that was not a choice as I needed to push either way and I could not. This continued until I could finally verbalise the gas was not doing anything. This is when someone discovered my gas was turned on to oxygen. I do not know why anyone would have changed it, especially without my knowledge. One midwife, who had been the rudest and roughest with me said they turned my gas off to see if I was faking.

Approximately after 15 minutes and an episiotomy my daughter was born. She had been stuck for 2.5 hours by this stage and was not recovering well between contractions. She was given oxygen and moved to the special care nursery. She stayed there for 28 hours. I remained in the birthing unit for another 4 hours. In these 4 hours I did not receive any basic cleaning. My body was covered in blood, including my hands. I had only a blanket covering my naked body, and I was alone as my partner was with our daughter in special care. Whilst I understand the staff may have had other pressing tasks to attend to, no doubt you can appreciate how degrading one would feel after an exhausting labour, child being taken away, 1 minute of skin on skin with my child, and to eat dinner covered in blood. I waited for my partner to come back before I showered due to how I felt.

I got to properly meet my daughter at 20:30 that night. The following morning, I was met by 2 midwives to check me. They gave me antibiotics with penicillin in it, which was on my medical history that I could not have penicillin as I had an allergic reaction as an infant. I was advised to deal with it. I was then asked how old I was. I was 31 at the time and I was met with "we thought you were younger". I was puzzled as to why my age was relevant and I hope

this didn't factor into the way I was treated. I was also in a significant amount of pain with the episiotomy and was given Panadol and voltaren. I struggled to get out of bed or walk. I was discharged prior to 48 hours post birth. I went to my GP 2 days later as the episiotomy was excruciating. They advised to go back to the hospital. I did and I was told it was normal but I should get a pap smear to rule out cervical cancer as my cervix was red. This incited more fear. I went back to my GP and was diagnosed with an infection in the stitches of the episiotomy.

I was diagnosed with PTSD after this birth and I still receive treatment for this now. This is not a diagnosis to take lightly. It has changed every aspect of my life and I need to navigate life identifying potential triggers. I was fearful of the midwife and I do not believe the hospital system will help me as they didn't believe my pain. I sent a letter to the hospital where they eventually admitted they did not read my notes and did not manage my pain appropriately.

No mother should go through this experience, to have her pain ignored and to be told it mustn't be that bad because you can talk. It was degrading and cruel. I often think that if my pain was acknowledged my daughter may have been born sooner and may not have needed to go to special care, and I could have had that important initial bonding experience with her. If my care was different and my pain believed and managed I would have had a different mental health outcome and I would have been happy.

Thankfully I had a different experience when I had my second child in May 2023 at the . My husband and I made sure we did everything different due to being let down the first time. We went private and had a caesarean. From the moment my husband and I stepped into the hospital we were treated with kindness and respect.

The anaesthetic nurse reassured us from the moment she introduced herself to my husband and I that we would be treated with nothing but respect and kindness, and that she would be there to advocate and support us, especially if anything upset us. She told us that my baby would not be removed from my care without permission and that I would be told what was happening with my baby, and if there was anyone there that made us uncomfortable they would be asked to leave. This exceeded our expectations immediately. The anaethetist thoroughly explained what he was doing before and during the caesarian. He compassionately and attentively listened to and understood my medical history and medical contraindications. I was educated on what I'd be feeling and how my pain would be managed afterwards. Prior to this the anaethetist called me to thoroughly discuss my history. My obstetrician empowered me through education and compassion. None of my decisions were unnecessarily questioned or scoffed at. I was also provided with excellent support in the form of a perinatal psychologist.

Every midwife and nurse we had showed the same level of excitement for us, compassion, kindness, and dedication. No matter how busy they might have been they never rushed their work. Thankfully this experience was healing, however this should have been the experience I received as a first-time mother, not coming in as a defensive second time mother.

I decided to include the good experience too as there are many health professionals who do work hard and look after their patients, and this should also be acknowledged.

Thank you for reading about my experience.