

Submission  
No 902

## INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

**Name:** Name suppressed

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Partially  
Confidential

## My BT story

I'm \_\_\_\_\_, 31 years old and delivered my son on 20 October 2021.

Some important context to my story is that I am originally from The Netherlands, I am a highly educated full time working individual. I moved to Australia in 2018 with my now husband who is originally from Sydney.

Covid was a difficult time for us all, but for me in particular, as the border closures meant not seeing family and friends for a long time and them not experiencing my pregnancy or birth. I gave birth at the very end of the peak of the covid epidemic just before the borders re-opened. But my family was still not allowed to travel over to see me or meet my son.

Let's start at the beginning, I fell pregnant in early 2021. I managed to get into the public Midwifery programme at \_\_\_\_\_ Hospital and had my regular pregnancy check-ups with my wonderful midwife \_\_\_\_\_. All was going well and we were aligned on my birth plan; a natural water birth.

I went 10 days overdue and the night before my scheduled induction, labor started. At 5pm on the 19th of October my contractions started at home. We waited until midnight to go to the hospital, where my midwife \_\_\_\_\_ met us. I was 4 centimeters dilated at that stage and she admitted us to the birthing suite. Things were looking positive. We set up our fairy lights, music and battery powered and I was using my TENS machine. I was practicing what I learned in the Calm Birth course and managed well. I soon got into the bath, which was in my plan, and zoned out for the next 10 hours or so. \_\_\_\_\_ checked my progress, it was looking positive - 2 centimeters every 2-3 hours.. I was coping well until I stalled at 8 cms for 4 hours. It was getting very painful so I moved between the bath and shower, warm water was the only thing that helped with the pain. At some point around this time, my midwife broke my waters. Then she checked me again, this time she suspected the baby had turned posterior so she requested an ultrasound from the doctor. And it confirmed her assumption, my son was now posterior causing him to get more stuck meaning my contractions had just skyrocketed in pain.

Around this time, \_\_\_\_\_ informed us she had to leave and that another midwife who I had never met would take over. She had hit the 12 hours limit on her shift. The new midwife was lovely too but she came in just as things went downhill.

After they had established my son had turned posterior and I was still at 8cm I couldn't cope with the pain anymore. It was horrendous. I needed an epidural to help and encourage me to relax so I could dilate further. So after what seemed like an eternity the anaesthesiologist turned up. By this time I had been in labor for about 20+ hours. It was the two of them, two men, who seemed to think this was their afternoon tea. They were casually talking about random topics (I think it was about sports or coffee) between themselves while administering the epidural. It was

torture, listening to them having a jovial conversation while I had to sit still with pain levels at a 10/10. I wanted to scream to tell them to shut up.

The epidural really helped and they told me to have a bit of a break 20-30 minutes before the doctor would come in. As the pain became more manageable I realized I was starving, I asked for something to eat. They said I couldn't because they weren't sure if I would need a c-section. This is when I realized things were getting serious.

Suddenly the room started to fill up with nurses, doctors, midwives and apparatuses. The doctor, Dr. \_\_\_\_\_ was the one overseeing the birth with his student doctor. The midwife did her best to talk me through what's happening but I was too exhausted at this stage, we were getting close to the 24hr mark. Dr. \_\_\_\_\_ informed me he was going to use the vacuum to try to turn my son anterior. My son's heart rate was closely monitored but I felt like at this stage I had just become an object. This doctor is a very large man, his big hand and this vacuum pushing and pulling within me. They tried and tried, pulling with force, but the vacuum kept shooting off my son's head. All I could see was blood flying everywhere, including on the doctors faces. The doctor said my tailbone was in the way, and my son was stuck behind it. After trying with the vacuum for longer than the recommended time frame (which the doctor explained he did because my son's heart rate was stable and not elevated during this time), they eventually gave up.

It then became a bit more critical, I think they were seeing my son's heart rate drop so they used the forceps and we had 2-3 tries. They had to do an episiotomy and then I was told on the last try it was now or never, I had to push really hard and the doctor used a lot of force to get him out. He had his cord around his neck, which they could take off in time and quite easily.

He was here, I was in shock. When I look at the photos of this moment I can see I am just a shell; physically there but mentally or emotionally absent. He seemed fine, cried pretty quickly but they did do a few checks as they did have some concerns. All seemed fine as they gave him to me to enjoy what was meant to be our 'magical golden hour' but it was far from magical. The process of delivering the placenta started and the stitching. More pain and I was exhausted.

Once that was finished I asked for something to eat as I hadn't eaten for 24 hrs. Only to be told all they could give me was juice and some toast as the meal service had finished. How can there not be food available for a woman who has just endured delivering a baby?! I still can't believe this to this day. The first failure in the post-natal care system for setting women up for a successful recovery. Women need nutrition after delivering a baby.

Once I drank some juice, ate toast and all the snacks we had brought - I was informed I needed to take a shower before being able to be moved to the recovery ward. My first thought was "A SHOWER?! HOW THE HECK AM I GOING TO SHOWER?!". I was so weak and in so much pain. I pushed through and had a shower in a daze. A short one as I was feeling faint. Afterwards, I needed to sit down to avoid fainting. Shortly after, I was told they were ready for

me in the recovery ward (feeling the pressure for me to free up the delivery room for someone else). They assumed I would walk, there was no way as I was on the verge of fainting. They took ages to find a wheelchair, the one they brought in seemed to have come straight from the dump-yard; old and a flat tyre.

We got to the room, we were informed it was a shared one so my husband would not be able to stay. We knew that was a risk with going public but never thought I would be in such a bad state. I gave birth at 5pm, we got to the room around 8pm and visitors had to leave by 8pm. But I needed food. So we asked the midwife if my husband could still go to pick up some food somewhere and come back and they agreed but hinted at him really having to leave soon after that. I had some basic salads from Woolies with my husband, since that was the only thing open at that time of the night due to covid, and then he left to go home.

I was left in the hospital room with my son, in a lot of pain, feeling extremely weak and unable to care for him. They had told me that he inhaled a bit of amniotic fluid so that he might bring it up and seem like he is choking. I told myself I would just have to press the buzzer whenever to get help from the midwives. I was in so much pain, lying propped up in the bed with the pressure on my tailbone - which in hindsight was likely broken during the birth. The two nights in the hospital, which we were required to stay for, were just horrible and fuelled my trauma. I will list a few negative events that happened, but there were of course also great midwives that did their job well.

Here are some vivid memories from the first two nights in hospital:

- In the middle of the night, I heard my son choking. I quickly pressed the buzzer and a midwife rushed in and held him in the recovery position to help him recover from the choking. This is when I knew I did the right thing. It then happened again a few hours later, I pressed the buzzer - it took too long, so I had to jump up on my knees to be able to reach my son and hold him in the recovery position myself. Just as I did that, a midwife walked in and the first thing she said was “you must not be in pain if you are able to get up like this” and continued to dismiss my concerns about him choking. It was infuriating, of course I was in so much pain but was I going to let my baby choke in front of me?! Of course not!
- The next day Dr. \_\_\_\_\_ who delivered \_\_\_\_\_, stopped by for a debrief. This is when I started noticing some red flags. He explained the birth and answered questions but was still dismissive about me talking about the level of pain I felt from my tailbone. He just said there was nothing they could do and that all I needed to do was take Panadol and Voltaren. He also started saying things along the lines of “I can tell you are strong and won't get post- natal depression. You can handle this”. I felt uneasy and frustrated after the conversation.
- Later that day we were able to move to a private room so my husband could stay which was a game changer. Throughout the day midwives stopped by and topped up the Panadol and Voltaren. As the day progressed, continuously lying propped up in bed my tailbone pain got worse and worse. I got a nurse to come to assess my tailbone pain levels and ask for more pain relief. She fully dismissed my tailbone pain, saying it wasn't

that and blamed it on my hemorrhoids (which were also bad). She gave me some cream for my hemorrhoids. I felt dismissed and humiliated.

- I pushed through the second night with my husband's support and the following day a midwife came in and said "oh I can see you are about to cry, that's good because your milk is coming in". I was on the verge of tears the whole time because of my pain and the traumatic experience. Instead of asking whether I was okay, crying was considered a positive thing?! Again, I felt dismissed and humiliated.
- Before I left I wanted to make sure my stitches were healing ok, because I had heard they could get infected. I assumed that would be standard practice, but it didn't seem the case so I asked a midwife to come and check. She seemed surprised by my request which broke down my confidence in the system even more. It is broken.

After two days we were finally discharged, we couldn't wait to get out of the depressing hospital environment. But that meant I had to get to the car first, I barely made it - I was in so much pain and felt very faint and got no support from the hospital. We got in the car, I couldn't sit on my tailbone at all - it was so painful. Finally home, I could at least relax a little but little did I know I still had about 4 months of recovery ahead of me.

Once home, my midwife came the next day to check up on me which was wonderful and needed. I told her about my tailbone pain, she wasn't able to help with it or suggest treatment. I had to ask her to check my stitches again, thankfully I did, because it wasn't looking so good. She suggested I should go back to see Dr. I also asked to see a lactation consultant because I found out through YouTube that I could breastfeed lying down on my side to avoid putting pressure on my tailbone. Game changer.

I couldn't help but wonder why no one in the hospital had recommended that to me given it was known my tailbone took a hit during the delivery. Again, broken system. At this point, I started to wonder whether Dr. had avoided documenting some of the delivery details for his own benefit because it really seemed like no one knew the extent of what had happened during my delivery.

My midwife set up the appointments to see Dr. and a lactation consultant on the same day and time which was very helpful.

Here are some of the events that happened within the next few weeks:

- I went to see Dr. for my stitches. He agreed, wasn't looking great and took a swab to test for infections but gave me preemptive antibiotics anyway. While examining me I was silently crying but he proceeded to tell me again something along the lines of "you are a strong woman, you are Dutch, you won't get postnatal depression". He then tried to be helpful and said he knew of some antibiotics that were left at the hospital by someone else which he could give to me to avoid us having to make the trip to a pharmacy. (I was shocked I couldn't get the antibiotics from the hospital directly - going to a pharmacy seemed impossible). He came back in the room and back-handed me an

opened antibiotics box, I saw the original owner's personal details on the box and said to him that I probably shouldn't be seeing those. He got flustered and quickly ripped the patient's details off the box. Another red flag for me, this Doctor wasn't operating according to the guidelines. My confidence in the healthcare system really took another hit. I also felt like none of these appointments were registered anywhere, every time I showed up no one knew why I was there, except Dr.

- I went to see the lactation consultant, when she asked why I came to see her I started crying because just sitting for moments on chairs at the hospital was so painful. I told her about my tailbone pain and she suggested to call in another doctor and the midwife to discuss whether there was any treatment. The lactation consultant helped me with the breastfeeding lying down, which is the one thing that got me through the first 3 months. Then the doctor (one I hadn't seen before) and a midwife came in to discuss my tailbone, they really said they couldn't do anything and that I would maybe benefit from seeing a physiotherapist which I would have to arrange myself privately but couldn't provide any more guidance or help with my tailbone pain. At this stage when I walked it felt like there was a tennis ball in my lower back.
- A week later, I had to go back for a check to see whether the stitches were healing. Dr. still wasn't happy, meaning he was going to add a few stitches to make sure the cut would heal properly. I have a high pain threshold so I remained calm but couldn't hold back a few tears, tired of all I have had to go through. I was asking a few questions and he admitted he had a few patients at that time whose stitches were infected. Another red flag. He then instructed his assistant doctor to get another prescription for antibiotics for me but reminded her to make sure she wasn't documenting anything about my visit. Another red flag.
- Finally after two weeks the stitches were looking good but the rounds of antibiotics had caused my son and I to develop thrush, making breastfeeding more difficult and added another level of discomfort for me. I was never informed about the risk of thrush developing when taking antibiotics and breastfeeding. It seemed to never want to go away. Another disappointment.

We then settled into newborn life, still with significant tailbone pain and thrush discomfort. Turned out my son was very uncomfortable too, he would cry so much everyday for the first 3 months. It was part pain on his head/ neck from the forceps and part reflux. It was the hardest thing ever and my suffering had really impacted my ability to bond with my son, I was struggling a lot. We also noticed that he was scared of the dark, when we would go in and out of light/ dark places he would instantly cry when we got into the dark. I didn't think much of it until I started reading about birth trauma in children and how modern birth interventions are being linked to increased birth trauma in babies and this is starting to be linked to behavioral issues like ADHD in some early medical studies.

I started seeing a pelvic floor physio who could help me with my pelvic floor recovery but not with my tailbone pain. I searched high and low for someone who specialized in tailbone injuries and couldn't find anyone. I wasn't able to walk much, go out often or exercise because of the tailbone pain - making me even more lonely and isolated.

Then for Christmas I was set on going home to The Netherlands to finally see my family after the long Covid shutdown period. We were fortunate to be able to fly business class because I would not have been able to sit for 24 hours on end. I was able to lie down to help with my tailbone pain. Once we got to The Netherlands, I was out of my normal routine and therefore sitting a lot more. One night at dinner with my parents, I broke down. I was in so much pain sitting at the dinner table, trying to enjoy a meal with my family whom I had been longing to see for so long. My mum wanted to help and did her research, she found a local pelvic floor physio who also covered tailbone injuries. So she got me an appointment.

I went to see the physio in the Netherlands, hoping to finally get some answers. And oh my god, she did wonders. She listened to my story, said that they really should have taken an X-ray of my tailbone after the birth to diagnose it correctly. Further reducing my confidence in the care I received at Hospital.

She examined me and established the tip of my tailbone was likely broken and that it was also misaligned so she was able to pop it back into place. After the treatment, 3 months postpartum, the pain finally dropped by 60%.

Back in Australia, I was still struggling a lot mentally as our son was a fussy baby. I decided to seek help with my mental health through my GP. At 4 months postpartum I started seeing my psychologist who saved my life. She helped me process my traumatic birth and helped bring 'me' back to life. I also continued to see a Chiro and physio to help with my recovery until 12 months postpartum. Needless to say, the bills added up over time. I feel fortunate we are able to afford it. But I felt extremely frustrated though-out my journey that injuries inflicted at/ as a result of birth are not cared for and not covered by Medicare. It's humiliating and devastating.

This experience negatively impacted so many aspects of my life; my ability to care for my son, the ability to bond with my son, the ability to maintain relationships, extra costs, emotional strain and physical pain and issues. To this day, my birth trauma impacts me. Writing this document has meant sleepless nights and physically feeling sick reminiscing my experience. Although I would say I have processed it and I am finally in good shape physically after 1.5 years. The experience will forever overshadow the magical first 6 months of having my son.

So here are my recommendations:

- Antenatal, delivery and postpartum care needs to be considered as essential services, only offered in public care. You are probably wondering, if you can afford all the things mentioned above- why didn't you go private? Well out of principle and financial reasons. Antenatal, delivery and postpartum care are essential services. These should not differ between private or public, private services shouldn't even exist. This capitalist mentality of being able to get better when you pay more is dangerous and sickening, because every woman deserves the same when bringing new life into the world. Whether you are rich or poor, the care you need during pregnancy, delivery and recovery doesn't change. And the care we need as women is quite simple; we need to actually be cared for and

about. We are humans who are at their most vulnerable state, we are not just some baby expelling vending machine.

- There should be less focus on what birth types or interventions are performed within hospitals. There is so much focus on high natural birth rates that we are putting women through agony to avoid a c-section. Get rid of any KPIs that currently exist, the only KPI that should exist is whether the mother felt cared for and looked after; i.e had a positive experience. Focus on patient-centered care and services.
- Post-natal care needs to be introduced.
  - First of all, women should have easy and immediate access (covered by medicare) to specialists for their postpartum recovery. For example; physiotherapists, lactation consultants, chiropractors, psychologists etc. Women should be assessed within days of delivery and recommended a recovery plan where required. And a thorough handover to the woman's GP should be completed.
  - Second, you should consider a system like The Netherlands have, where time in hospital is minimized as much as possible (reducing costs) but a family gets a postpartum midwife ([kraamzorg](#)) for 7-10 days, 6-8 hours a day to help settle in at home, help care for the mum, baby and household and teach the basics of caring for a newborn. This is all part of the basic insurance coverage. These postpartum midwives are highly skilled and can assess a woman's wellbeing and support or escalate where needed. Making the first week of bringing your newborn home much easier and comfortable.
- Properly educate and assess maternity services staff on mental health and postpartum care.
- A hospital should have a local guide to specialists, which they can refer to, so that they can refer them (covered by medicare) to the right place for treatment for all possible postpartum injuries or issues.
- Invest more money in maternity services and stop spending so much on 'nice to haves' like fancy playgrounds and public toilets for example. I think all parents would agree basic high quality maternity care would be preferred over a fancy slide and bbq facilities

I really hope my story contributes to change and that it helps you to understand that the whole system needs to be redesigned. It is not just one issue, it's the large scale of smaller issues that snowball into overall long-term negative experiences.

If necessary, I would be happy to give more information and context to the issues I experienced.