

Submission
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INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

I am a female in my 20s and I have a wonderful husband and a beautiful son. I have been hesitant to share my story as I know there are many women that have experienced far worse. However, I realise now that this is the problem.

Like many women in Australia, I grew up being terrified of childbirth. I grew up listening to women share stories of their trauma and was taught that childbirth is something to fear because it is dangerous and that it will leave too physical and emotionally scarred but that “it’s okay because you get a beautiful baby”. I was determined to change the narrative for myself.

I fell pregnant when I was 26 years old. I was very fit, healthy and educated. I did countless hours of research; I attended classes and spoke to midwives and friends. I did this in hope to protect myself against the trauma and the statistics that we so often hear of (the hospital I was designated to birth in currently had a 50% caesarean rate despite the World Health Organization's recommendation of 10-15%). I wanted to have the knowledge to advocate for myself, for my body and for my baby. I was not afraid of childbirth; in fact, I was excited for it. I was absolutely terrified of being forced into unnecessary interventions and I was afraid of being vulnerable and bullied by the system into things that I didn’t want for myself or for my baby.

Prenatal care

At around 19 weeks I experienced extreme pain and cramping. I presented to the ED and was made to sit there with cramping pains for hours unaware of my baby’s wellbeing. It was not until a friend I was texting told me that I would be better off presenting to the maternity assessment and day unit facility at this hospital as that’s where they would end up sending me. The triage nurse did not mention this was an option. Sure, enough when I phoned the maternity unit, they told me that I should present there and then I had to triage again which would mean that my wait time would start again. At this point in our pregnancy journey, we were paying a private obstetrician as we wanted continuity of care and in the beginning weren’t aware or explained our options well in the area. Whilst I was experiencing this pain, I repeatedly attempted to contact the private OB. Once I was able to contact her, she offered me no advice or reassurance. She told me to just wait for the hospital. After imaging at the hospital, it was found that I had had a small placental abruption. I saw many different doctors during this time. Most of them had a different advice in regards to management and the likelihood of it resulting in a miscarriage. This conflicting advice was terrifying and made me feel so doubtful and scared. In the end I was labelled “high risk” told to go home and that there was nothing that could be done and I was just sent about my way to cope with that terrifying situation. The anxiety this left me with was physically and mentally unbearable. I would have panic attacks if I was left inside the house alone out of fear that if I did the wrong thing or moved the wrong way, I may harm my baby or have a miscarriage. I was offered no emotional support or options from the hospital. I had to seek this out myself.

In addition to this, the private obstetrician I was paying phoned the hospital unit and told the doctors and nurses that she wouldn’t be treating me anymore as I was now labelled “high risk” and as such she thought it would be better if I remained in the hospital system. I was “dropped” by an obstetrician because I was too much work and it felt as though I was now too much hassle for the once easy pay cheque. When I phoned the practice and asked for a refund for what I had paid I was told this would not be possible as I had “paid for a service”.

Because the care provider we had paid for in hope of continuity of care had refused to care for us this meant that I was now 20 weeks pregnant and had missed out on a place within both the local midwifery group programs. This would mean I was now placed in the public hospitals “high risk clinic”. After a few visits to the high-risk clinic, I was able to be ‘released’ which meant I could join a midwifery group practice if I was able to be accepted into a spot. I phoned and visited the MGP weekly for months and thankfully managed to gain a spot. This experience was the highlight of my pregnancy. I was assigned my own midwife and she visited my home for appointments. The care that I received during this time

was professionally and personally of the highest quality. I felt cared for in a way that made me feel safe but as though I was in charge of my body and my baby.

Unfortunately, things began to fall apart again and I was forced out of the MGP due to “hospital policy” as once again I was considered too “high risk” to give birth in this program due to decreased amniotic fluid. I requested a repeat scan and again was met with inconsistency and differing opinions in regards to my scan results. Despite this they still refused to let me birth with the MGP and that meant my midwife, the one person I felt safe with was taken away. I felt so scared, confused and alone.

Induction of Labour & Birth

I was then sent to the maternity unit at the bigger hospital and told that I had several complications and as such needed to be induced promptly as my baby was not doing well. My husband was declined entry into the hospital because of COVID rules despite pleading for an exemption. I was 39 weeks pregnant and on crutches due to pain from pelvic issues during pregnancy. My husband was left to watch me crutch my way alone across a huge hospital to the maternity unit. I was then told I was having a vaginal examination and given a stretch and sweep by a young male doctor who told me “You’ve done such a great job keeping baby inside this long but now it’s time to let us help”. I felt like I was being spoken to like a little child. I felt trapped, I was physically alone. I felt I had no choice.

I was made to wait over 48 hours in total for this induction to commence which caused us significant distress given we were told our baby needed to be born as he was not doing well but despite this, we were made to sit in the hospital panicked and very confused. The staff on duty were unkind and refused to acknowledge our concerns. When I attempted to advocate for us, we were shut down, belittled, and dismissed. I remembering standing at the desk crying trying to seek an explanation or to see the doctor. The nurses told me “I could leave but if I did, I would have to start again if I came back”. We were bullied, scared, overpowered and outnumbered and made to feel as though we were annoying and a burden to them. I was terrified into believing that I needed an induction and then made to sit there for two days fearing the worst for my child and being completely disregarded by the hospital.

Eventually a Foley bulb was put into me. This was very painful. After this procedure I was left in the room alone working through this pain when a lady in a red scrub who never identified herself, I later assumed to be the team leader walked into my room and literally started yelling at me. I remember being in so much pain, by myself still trying to wrap my head around my stressful situation and now I was being yelled at by an unidentified staff member. I was on crutches for my Sacro iliac joint pain. I was still very mobile and active during my pregnancy however when needed I used these crutches to assist with the aggravation the SIJ pain often caused me. This lady was so unkind and rude. She literally yelled at me and told me that “I have heard you’ve asked for a bath in your labour room tomorrow, you cannot have this as you are on crutches and its unsafe and we cannot carry you out of the bath”. The lady was extremely worked up, angry and frustrated at me and continued to yell despite the pain I was evidently in or despite me being alone. She did not give me a chance to speak, work out what was going on or explain myself. This was extremely traumatising, upsetting and scary and continued to worsen the already traumatic situation. A bath in my birth space was something that meant a great deal to me and was the only way I felt I could get through tomorrow, given so much of our choice had already been taken away. I asked several times for the lady in the red top to stop yelling at me and when she did, I was finally able to explain my situation. She looked surprised and told me that in fact it would then be appropriate for me to be able to use the bath. She told me “I can’t promise you’ll get one but” despite me pleading to her and several other nurses. She did not apologise for the way she had spoken to me and left the room. I still to this day do not know who she was. I was then sent back downstairs and told I had to spend the night on the hospital ward. I was alone and terrified with the painful induction device in me.

I felt pressured to have my waters broken once I arrived to the birthing suite, like I had to “get things moving along”. I was conveniently (for the hospital) booked in for an induction at 6am and felt this was so the hospital could get my baby born and get me out in a convenient time for them. I wanted time to start labouring on my own once they were broken as so much choice had already been taken away from me. I was not given this space and felt very forced into receiving the Synthetic oxytocin drip “to speed up” my labour. I am sure this had everything to do with what was convenient for the hospital rather than what was best for me and my baby.

I was labouring in the shower with the support of my husband when I looked to find two doctor hovering over me while I was on the floor on my hands and knees telling me that I needed to be rushed for an emergency caesarean as my baby was not doing well. They told me they turned off the drip which meant my contractions would stop and they did this as my baby’s heart rate was dropping significant with every contracting. This was all they explained to me.

From this point on everything happened so quickly and I was in too much pain at times to speak to ask questions or advocate for myself. Myself and my needs were swallowed up amongst the chaos. I felt like I was a task that needed to be “completed” (get the baby out in a time that is convenient and fits in well with the hospital) rather than a person experiencing the most significant and now traumatic event of their life.

There were people in my room, in my space taking off my clothes, dressing me in a gown, making me lay on my back so that they could put compression stockings on my legs, taping up my jewellery and prepping me for theatre. I remember the contractions did not stop- they got worse and more frequent and much stronger. I was so scared because they told me that the contractions would stop once the drip stopped and I remember thinking that I was killing my baby and that every contraction was “bad” because it was hurting him like they had said. I was so absolutely terrified.

They took me to the theatre waiting bay where we were made to wait for a very long time as the person in front of me, they said, was still in theatre. I was so confused, it felt like no one knew what was happening, I felt so afraid. I was in severe pain stuck in a tiny waiting room with random people all around me. I remember the beautiful midwife that was taking care of me at the time talking to the anaesthetists and it was the only time that I heard her sound worried or stressed asking where the doctor was and that he needed to get here soon. I was so scared they made me feel like me and my baby were going to die.

While we were there waiting, I told them I felt like I was definitely progressing in labour and I felt like the baby was coming. I don’t think that they believed me because it had only been around 30 minutes since they had decided my labour had “officially started”. Sure, enough I could not lay flat on my back any longer, I got up on my hands and knees while we were still in the waiting bay and I told them I was going to push my baby out. When the midwife examined me, she said that I was right and that the baby was right there.

I was eventually taken through to the operating theatre. I was forced to lay on my back again, they put my legs spread open up in stirrups. I did not want students or any unnecessary staff present for my labour and birth, despite this being requested in writing and verbally communicated on several occasions there were student present and approximately 20 staff in the room. I was absolutely horrified. It was everything my nightmares were made.

Laying on my back I remember thinking can I push my baby out of are they cutting him out of me. I was told “I could have a vaginal birth” (a win for me) but that they needed the baby out right now so they “needed” to perform an episiotomy. My baby was born in three pushes. I feel like I had no say with the cut they performed on my vagina and I feel as though it did not need to be performed. My total pushing time was documented as 11 minutes so I wasn’t even given a chance to try and push my baby out without a doctor cutting me.

My son was born after a total labour time of one hour and forty-five minutes, vaginally on the operating table with my legs in stirrups. An extremely unnatural, rare and short labour and birth, especially for a first-time mother. This was without a doubt due to a significant use of medical interventions which cascaded into the nightmare I experienced. I was told that I needed these interventions in order to birth a healthy baby as he had “intrauterine growth restriction” and “his heart rate was too low” and he “was not coping” and “my fluid was too low”. I was told basically from the beginning of my pregnancy that my body was failing and that I “needed” all these done to me and my baby in order for us to be okay. Despite all the things they said I gave birth to a perfectly healthy thriving baby boy. All of his measurements and observations were within the normal range. I was a mere few minutes away from having major surgery for no reason.

Once he was born the doctor made my husband cut the cord in under 60 seconds, again despite my documented request for delayed cord clapping and my baby to be brought immediately to my chest. They put him there for a few seconds before taking him away. They put him on a CPAP machine because they said he was making a small “grunting sound”. I kept asking to hold him and for them to give him back and they said no that they will have to take him to the NICU. I ended up yelling at them and demanding them to put him on my chest immediately. When they put him on me, within seconds his breathing was normal and he settled. The doctors looked stunned and eventually ended up leaving the room because all his observations were perfect.

After the birth I remained the operating table with my legs in stirrups, where I was sutured in front of the staff who still remained and who I did not know or consent to being present in the room. Staff were at the end of the table I assume learning and watching my vagina be sutured. At no stage was I asked or consented to this. I remember the doctor kept saying “you need to relax and keep your legs open”. If you have just pushed a human out of your vagina with an episiotomy and then have someone proceed to stitch up a fresh open wound in front of a large amount of people, I can assure you that you will be unable to relax.

We later returned to our room and there was a midwife who I had never met who basically grabbed my son and shoved his face on my nipple. I remember being so uncomfortable and I felt so awkward and violated. He didn't latch and later when I received a copy of my birth notes I read that she had documented “mother has attachment issues”. We left the hospital within a few hours and I breastfed my son that night at home in my bed and breastfed him for another 18 months.

I had to push very hard to have a debrief about my birth. I did this in hope that asking my questions and receiving explanations would help with my healing. It did not. The doctor who I met with wasn't even present during the birth. She just read my notes back to me and said that the doctors did everything that she would have done. She told me that she couldn't explain to me why they completed an episiotomy, something that I find very traumatising and unacceptable and that “it was a good outcome because you have healthy baby”. I left feeling even more helpless and traumatised.

Despite preparing, education and advocating for myself as well as requesting staff to read my birth preference which I had several copies of, my experiences during my labour and birth were extremely traumatic. I believe the trauma I faced could have absolutely been avoided and was due to large number of unnecessary interventions combined with a lack of care, kindness and respect for myself and my unborn child. It feels as though we are still living in a time where anything can be done to a woman's body without explanation or consequences as long as there is a “healthy baby” at the end of it and that this should be an adequate explanation for the pain, trauma and suffering that so many women are left with. We are then living in a society that makes us feel ashamed of speaking up and advocating for change.

These experiences are just a summary of the pain and suffering that I had to endure because of a system that failed me. An experience that has been beyond traumatic and has caused huge financial burden (due to the money we have spent on private psychologists as the hospital offered none), I have had post-

partum depression, anxiety, insomnia and have been medicated these. The unimaginable thing to me is that stories like mine seem to be more common than those of women feel empowered by their birth.

It breaks my heart that we have been set up to fail. That we have a system that is failing us and that daily around this country women are experiencing lifelong severe physical and mental trauma and that we are told we must accept it. I pray and I hope that these stories create change because we so desperately need it .

“We have to dismantle the whole way we do maternity care and we need to start again”- Birth Time: the documentary.