

Submission
No 925

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

I was lucky to conceive easily and had my first child, a healthy baby girl, when I was 39. The doctors at the hospital called it a “geriatric pregnancy” which most of my older first-time mum friends found offensive, but which I thought *perfectly described the experience*. A gruelling 40 weeks of nausea, gestational diabetes, exhaustion, congestion, heartburn, and acute pelvic pain. I felt about 80 years old, all of the time.

I had wanted to be part of the midwife group practice at [redacted] so I could get to know a medical practitioner and have a single point person I could get answers to my questions from and to have proper care from. I didn’t have a regular GP as I didn’t have any chronic health conditions. As I was diagnosed with borderline gestational diabetes which I fixed through diet alone, [redacted] dropped me from the clinic and put into the gestational diabetes clinic. However, the support I got was much worse than I would have received. I was stuck for 3 hour waits to see different midwives and obstetricians each appointment. They forgot to check results from blood tests of previous visits and basically didn’t ask me important questions about how I was doing. They missed that I was exhausted and had major iron deficiency. They didn’t ask about my pain and totally missed that I had pelvic symphitis which meant severe pain when walking and standing. There were no physiotherapists as part of the hospital service which left me in major physical and mental despair with no treatment.

I now laugh at the absurdity of how unprepared I was for the changes I was about to go through. But if I thought the pregnancy was jarring, it seems nothing could have prepared me for the experience of childbirth and the pain and fear that lay ahead.

I abandoned all hope of a “normal birth” (a loaded and unhelpful term) at 41 weeks when it became apparent my baby was getting too big to stay in. At 10am on the Monday I was induced. Just a few hours into my hospital stay, I was having painful contractions every few minutes but my cervix just wouldn’t dilate.

It was mid-October (prime baby season) but my local hospital had overbooked its birthing suites so there was no room for me in the maternity ward. They left me in a darkened room with no midwife, no bouncy ball, no bath and no pain relief. A series of midwives came through to check to see if I needed to give birth. Some of them seemed as though they needed to retire. One midwife thrust her hand up my vagina with such ferocity it shocked my husband. In any other context you would call that assault. She declared “there’s something wrong with your cervix” and then promptly left the room, clearly irritated.

Induction turned out to be the first in a series of cascading obstetric interventions. By midnight on the Monday I was finally in the delivery suite (which had midwives that treated me well) but I still hadn’t dilated. Finally I was given an epidural, but it made my breathing shallow and my blood pressure too low, and I had to be watched throughout the night – again, with great support in the suite.

Daylight arrived and 30 hours into the labour it was time to push. Two hours of this but nothing seemed to be happening. I then remember the exact moment when it became apparent things were not going well. It was at 2pm on the Tuesday and the midwives started to talk amongst themselves that the birth wasn't happening as it should. I turned to my

husband - himself a seasoned ED and ICU nurse - and watched the blood drain from his face as the cardiac arrest team with a defibrillator and a dozen or so hospital obstetricians rushed the room. Minutes felt like hours as I was pried apart with forceps. My husband looked small and fearful. They kept me in that agonising position for the next 30 mins and it felt like the baby was never coming out. Then, after a heroic final push, my daughter made it out. She was alive; it was a thrilling moment. I cried as I stared shocked, shocked to meet my newborn baby, shocked at what had just happened to me. As my daughter was laid on my chest and the obstetrician poked and prodded and sewed me up, I surveyed the crime scene around me.

Because of severe pelvic pain throughout the second half of my pregnancy I had been warned by an external physiotherapist I saw a few times that having my feet in stirrups could be dangerous. Of course in the middle of the panic and chaos of the delivery ward, it hadn't occurred to me to raise that with the midwives since it seemed (or I was told) the only way to get her out was to put my legs up and have her wrenched out of me. They got her out, but I was terribly injured.

I stayed in the ward for five nights, sharing a small windowless room with a series of women who it seemed had effortlessly given birth and sent home with their new bundles of joy. I didn't sleep more than two or three hours a day as I tried to deal with my broken body and the pain I was in. I attempted fruitlessly to breastfeed. My daughter kept losing weight and I was steadily becoming deranged. There were no midwives to help with hospital staff run off their feet. I had no idea how to use the breastpump or how or where to clean the equipment. My child drank my milk out of dirty bottles. On day 3, I rang the Breastfeeding Association at midnight during my stay to speak to a sleep deprived volunteer with my cry for help. The sleep-deprived mother volunteer asked me "where are you?". I said "I am in the maternity ward, but there is no one to help me." I could hear midwives outside my room talking about other midwives and complaining about their lactation approaches. I couldn't trust anyone's advice and didn't have enough help to figure it out. My baby kept crying, she was so hungry.

On day 4 I just started to cry and couldn't stop. Finally they called for a social worker who recommended I get a room by myself. For 30 mins I got access to a lactation consultant and we nearly got my baby on the boob.

The hospital discharged both of us on day 5 with still major issues facting our post-natal journey. They didn't suggest or offer me any post-natal care even though I was clearly so physically and mentally injured. I had to cry to request a script for pain relief. Noone suggested I see a physiotherapist. There was no referral mechanism. I still couldn't walk or stand without sharp pain.

I've since learned this is a typical response to women's suffering, which is usually diminished or simply ignored by institutionalised medicine. Women are expected to endure untold amounts of pain and discomfort in our healthcare systems. I could not find a GP that knew how to help and every attempt to advocate for some care drained me even more. The neglect of the health authorities was unfathomable to me, and my sense of isolation intense. Even

though I had people who cared, when I was at my most vulnerable, it became very clear: *I was on my own.*

My partner was working 80 hour weeks so we could save enough money for a house deposit in Sydney where a dilapidated squat 30 kms out of the city will set you back over \$1.5 mill. Making money was of the essence and that meant the baby stuff was mostly up to me, day in, day out. It wasn't long before I forgot how to sleep, and a deep, overwhelming fatigue began to take root. Not a day went by that I wondered whether I would survive it all. Living through that while adjusting simultaneously to life with a small child felt lonely and unbearable.

I had one community nurse visit for 2 hours. It was bliss. Then she left, and I was back to my bleak experience with a child who wouldn't latch and a mental state that was rapidly declining.

Did I have postnatal depression? I really dislike that label. What I experienced was, quite frankly, a completely reasonable emotional response to an unreasonable situation. Of course there were sweet moments with my little bundle, but there was always the utter exhaustion. It's a feeling of being just completely depleted mentally and physically. Spending every second in a state of apprehension, my muscles having grown permanently tense from steeling myself against the next cry and the next need.

I now know what that feeling that haunted me was. It was the dread of inadequacy as I looked at all of my responsibilities and realised that I lacked the resources to carry the load.

Months in, I made a last ditch call-out on Facebook. Could anyone help me out by making me some food? Since I was unable to stand after my pelvis had been ripped apart, I couldn't really make myself a sandwich.

Dozens of people (mostly women, mostly mothers) heard the cry and came to my rescue. Three months of piping hot meals, home-made desserts, and care packages of every kind arrived at my doorstep. My own mother, who had not been close during the pregnancy, showed up every day to wash the bottles, change the nappies, do the laundry and rock the baby to sleep. She eventually set up a nursery at her place, and this nearly-blind, arthritic 70 year old woman, took my child to her home to care for my baby each day, while her own child tried to recover.

A word on sleep. Gosh, I had no idea how intense sleep deprivation can be. How it messes with your brain and makes life almost unrecognisable. Five weeks in, I had left my daughter with my folks to run an errand, when I tripped in the street and fell. I lay on the ground for ages, unable to get up. A crowd of people soon gathered around me and someone finally asked, "Are you okay?" I replied, "No, I'm not. I'm a mother of a newborn - I haven't slept!"

At its best, life is hysterical and you laugh at the silly things you do and say. Like forgetting the word for 'jug', and recalling that you have several university degrees but that three letter words now have you stumped. At its worst, the world becomes a dark place. You are

overwhelmed, you question your sanity, and wonder if you'll spend the rest of your life feeling that way.

I couldn't walk without pain for years (still there is pain seven years on) and my ability to cope with the physical demands of a small child was horribly impacted. I'm still haunted by it all.

Even though I had two step-children who lived with us part-time, like every other first-time parent, I had no clue what I was in for. Parenting is such a tectonic shift in your life and the experience is really one that's full of contradictions: while having a little girl was glorious, it was also awful. I wish there had been a system that could have helped.