

Submission
No 955

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

Date Received: 15 August 2023

Partially
Confidential

My birth was unexpected. I didn't experience any labour, I woke at 38 weeks with bleeding. I went to see my GP, thinking he would tell me that my labour would begin soon, but he instead sent me straight to the hospital. By the time I got there I had meconium stained blood appearing.

My babies heart rate was monitored as soon as I got there. The heart rate was unsteady, and within an hour of being there, I was raced down the hallway into theatre, put under general anaesthetic and my baby was delivered via emergency C Section in less than 7 minutes.

I understand my babies birth was an emergency and I respect this. For this, I am grateful that my baby is with me today. However. I will forever be traumatised by how I was treated during the most vulnerable and emotional event of my life.

The midwife on duty was lovely. She was kind and caring, and gave me space to ask questions and was patient when I cried in fear or frustration. She is one of the few positive memories I have.

The Doctor - or Surgeon - I still don't know who exactly was in charge, was another story. He was cold, abrupt, and didn't explain anything as he went. He appeared in the room as the emergency was unfolding. He simply stated we didn't have time for anything else other than a general anaesthetic and it was happening right now.

I was scared that my birth wishes would be neglected. Despite having my birth plan on file, he didn't read it. The midwife took him aside and showed him, and he reluctantly read it, and said he would do what he could. He never once smiled, never acknowledged the fear in the situation. The last thing I remember him saying before I went under was 'we have less than 7 minutes to get this baby out.' It was terrifying being the last thing that I heard.

The most traumatic part of my stay at hospital was in recovery.

I woke in a bed, shaking uncontrollably, and struggling to understand where I was, how long I had been there, and what was going on. It took me a long time to understand I was awake after my surgery. I heard nurses around me talking, having conversations, but no one acknowledged me. I laid there terrified, feeling invisible and feeling the worst I have ever felt in my life, physically and psychologically.

The nurses never looked at me or acknowledged me. My whole body was violently shaking, and I could hear the bed rattling and the tubes being pulled on with my movement. Only when my shaking got to an extreme level, a cold and abrupt nurse told me the shaking is normal after a general anaesthetic, and to do my best to try and stop the shaking. She said nothing else. This meant nothing, I had no control over my body. I felt like I could vomit. My abdomen hurt more than I could ever imagine. The shaking was making me feel like I could pass out again. I couldn't make any noise, as my throat was damaged from the breathing tube. Through all this, no one looked at me. No one acknowledged me. The nurses talked about their weekend, like nothing else was going on. I was so confused, so in pain, I felt like I could die. I thought I might pass out, but the shaking was stopping me from losing consciousness. It was terrifying. Why was I going through this without anyone speaking or looking at me?

Throughout this time, I wondered where my baby was. My main question, causing me more pain than any of the physical symptoms - 'was my baby dead?' I had no answer. Last I knew, I was put to sleep with 30 staff frantically running around me, my husband crying in the corridor. Now, I woke up alone, with no one paying any attention to me. What had happened to my baby? If she had survived, was she physically or mentally harmed in any way? Where was my husband? Where was the midwife? I was so confused, so hurt, my whole body and heart and mind in absolute agony from not only being separated from my baby, but wondering where she was dead, who had her, what was going on.

It felt like an eternity trying to get my voice to work. I kept willing everything in my body to be able to speak. After an agonising amount of time, I managed to get a nurses attention, and managed to ask - 'where's my baby?' 'What happened to my baby?'

She seemed annoyed, like I was making a big deal or interrupting her. She coldly said to me - 'Your babies ok, she's with your husband.' That was it. What did ok mean? Was she barely alive? Was she injured? Was she in an incubator? I had so many questions, but my body wasn't working. All I knew was that she survived, but beyond that I had nothing. The pain that this caused, the torn feeling in my body, the pain of being separated from the baby I had just grown, I could never have imagined. A year later, it still keeps me awake at night. The terrifying flashbacks are something I will forever live with.

At this stage, my shaking got worse and it was almost like a seizure. The nurses were annoyed, they instructed me to try and stop shaking. Like it was something I was doing on purpose.

The Anaesthetist who had put me under from my surgery suddenly appeared. I remember him only briefly from before my surgery, but I remember him being caring, that had tried to prepare me for my surgery in the few minutes he had. He sat next down next to me, and told me he was going to give me something for the shaking, as my body can't keep doing this or my condition wouldn't improve. He told me the surgery went well, and my baby was well. A wave of relief washed over me. He was the only person who had spoken to me for more than a minute since I had been here. He was the first person to look me in the eyes, and speak with care in his voice. I broke down into tears, sobbing, and kept saying to him with a begging, pleading tone in my voice 'thank you for being so kind, you're the only one who had been kind to me. Thank you, thank you.' He looked so confused, and said its ok. It was a basic level of care, but I had to cling to it; I felt alone, hated, like I was an inconvenience, and he was the only person who felt any form of care towards me, and cared whether I knew my baby was alive, somewhere, without me.

One of the most ironic, painful memories of my time in recovery was an elderly dementia patient in the bed across from me. She kept screaming that the pain was too much and she wanted to die. She clutched a baby doll in her arms. It was like someone had given her that baby doll to taunt me, a constant reminder that my baby was off somewhere else and I had no idea where. Her cries of pain and anguish broke me even further. How was I in this hell, laying for hours shaking, barely able to speak, with nurses who didn't care, with my baby somewhere unknown, not knowing what happened to her, and I laid with these patients around me in pain, reminding me of my baby.

It had been roughly 7 hours of laying in bed, going through this. I kept hearing the nurses at this point talking about my vitals saying they weren't getting any better, and they were supposed to have improved by now. I had kept asking 'when can I see my baby?' They kept telling me once I was better. This had gone on for hours. They kept silently standing near my bed, calling the Doctor to ask what to do as my condition wasn't improving. I had no willpower or strength left in me, but I prayed to God, and with the last little bit of energy in me, I got their attention and told them as long as they keep me separated from my baby, I wasn't going to improve. I was too stressed, too upset, and I would feel better once I was with her. They finally listened, and with the Doctors permission, I was taken to the ward and finally reunited with my baby.

The following day, still only half aware of what was going on as I had so many drugs still in my system, a man came in and started talking to me from the end of my bed. I didn't understand who he was, but after a little while I realised he must be the Doctor/Surgeon from the previous day - I couldn't be sure though. He began speaking about things so quickly, I didn't understand what he was saying. He said something about the surgery being a success and that I would be eligible for a VBAC. I was trying to keep up with what he was saying, I was on so much medication, severely sleep deprived, and he spoke so quickly. The main thing that stood out to me was the line 'we're very lucky, if it had been a few hours later then things could have turned out very differently.' What did he mean by this? That my baby or I would have died? It was a leading statement and didn't contain any facts. It hit me hard. After he said that, he asked if I had any questions, which at this point I didn't as I was still figuring out who he was and what was this conversation was about. Then he left. He was there for maybe a minute at best, never came closer than the foot of my bed. He was so cold, so nonchalant, and didn't give me anything with his name, or with details of what happened. To this day I'm still so confused and I just wish he had given me 5 minutes of his day to explain what had happened.

The days, weeks and months at home after my birth were torture. I had severe anxiety, based around health and the fear of returning to the hospital. I remember one night, about a week after birth and I had bleeding from my scar, which I knew wasn't normal. I stayed at home panicking about it, terrified to go to the hospital, that they would separate me from my baby again and all my control would be taken away. Every time my baby spat up milk, sneezed, had a long sleep, I had a panic attack thinking she might die, and that we would have to go back to the hospital again. I had so many nightmares about whether she was mine, I didn't get to see her be born, I don't know what they could have done to her while she was out of my sight. I love this baby with every fibre of my being, and this fear that she might not be mine tore my heart to pieces. The only comfort to alleviate I've had over this past year is that she looks like me.

I hate that I have to have these fears, these intrusive thoughts, these physical and psychological scars attached to me and my beautiful baby the rest of my life. I feel guilt that my baby didn't get to enter the world naturally. I'm terrified she's unknowingly harmed from the experience. I understand that these emergencies happen, and I count myself blessed every single day I have my baby, I just wish I had gone through something like this with staff who provided support, patience, explanation, and reassurance. I always counted myself lucky to live in a country with healthcare like we do, until I learnt and experienced the trauma and violence pregnant and birthing mothers go through every single day. My husband and I have delayed trying for another baby, because we're terrified to birth in a hospital again. I'm working on getting professional support to overcome my nightmares, my fears, and my depression, but I worry that I will carry this forever.

It was an incredibly difficult process to share this birth story, but I've done so in the hope this submission makes a difference. Women and their babies deserve to be treated with dignity, respect, and have a voice when it comes to what happens to their bodies and their babies. Maternity care in Australia should be governed by patient first care, backed with the most recent evidence and understanding of the amazing physiological ability women have to birth. Our bodies were made to do this, and it's a travesty that we're treated as incapable, as emotional, and as dollar signs in the system. For now, I will hold out hope that we see a positive and empowering overhaul of the system in Australia.

Thank you.