

Submission
No 963

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

Birth Trauma Inquiry

For the longest time, I put this all on me. That I should have done more research, that I should have asked more questions, that I should have stood my ground. But I did all those things and they were not enough. For the longest time I did not have the words to tell my story and while I've wanted to write it, this Inquiry has given me a reason to. It wasn't until I realised trauma symptoms within myself that I fully came to understand that the events leading up to my birth and the birth itself had a lasting impact on me. I still give myself a hard time because I feel like others have experienced worse but only I know the sheer impact of this on my internal being so I am calling it out as trauma. My greatest source of support during those initial months of realising this was seeing a psychologist and a birth trauma Facebook group where I learnt that how I was feeling was common. I was horrified by discovering that but also felt seen.

Antenatal care and birthing at

Hospital

To start, I will say, most of the questionable care I was provided reflects poorly on the system, the doctors and not the nurses/midwives. For me, birthing day was not a day. I was physically and mentally being worn out by the system from approx 36 weeks when I presented to the antenatal clinic for review - it was more like a birthing month! Prior to this, I had a GP shared care arrangement but as I contracted Covid in my pregnancy my GP was directed to refer me for follow up at the hospital which we did. The hospital doctor at that 5 May 2022 review didn't know why I was there and I explained and was left feeling like an inconvenience. The excessive wait times up to 3-4 hours despite having an appointment for a review also impacted on my view of antenatal care by the hospital. This was my first pregnancy and birth, and most likely my last. This is a summary of the events in those final weeks leading up to the birth.

Monday 16 May 2022 - 36 weeks + 3 days - Antenatal appointment

- I remained in the clinic for a while because they monitored my tightenings. I didn't say I was in pain, I think what triggered the monitoring is that I could not recall feeling the baby move. They saw I was having regular tightenings and I overheard the doctor say that if I give birth this week that things would be fine. They let me go but asked that I come in for a follow up assessment on Thursday.

Thursday 19 May 2022 - 36 weeks + 6 days - Day assessment unit appointment

- I attended the approx 11am appointment and was monitored. Again I was still having regular tightenings and as I was under 37 weeks, fully effaced and 1cm dilated they sent me to the birthing suite.
- The doctor who performed the cervical check on me before the decision to move me to the birthing suite was forceful with both the speculum and his hand. To this day, I describe it like he stuck his whole fist inside me and gave it a good shake around - that's how it felt. I can't remember if I reacted at that moment, but I do remember the look on the face of the female staff member who was present when the male doctor did this. To this day, it makes me sick to my stomach that such force was used.
- I spent the rest of the day and into the evening in the birthing suite being monitored.
- No one could explain what was happening. They were not sure if I was in labour. They kept asking about my pain and I kept saying I didn't have any. I just felt regular

tightenings. They remained regular and the doctors wanted to give me endone to slow the tightenings down. They explained it was too early to have the baby yet.

- What I later pieced together and point blank asked was were they trying the slow things down to get me to midnight to which they said yes. Because at midnight I'd then be classed at 37 weeks and then my baby would not be born premature.
- I hesitated about the endone as I was NOT in pain, but consented only to half a dose. Good thing I said half, as my blood pressure decreased and I passed out briefly.
- The endone did not change anything and so the plan was to keep me overnight.
- At the shift change, the new shift wanted to send me home. I asked them to do a cervical check to see progress since no one could tell me what was happening. They did it, no speculum used thankfully, and they were gentle and nothing like the forceful doctor from earlier. They said nothing had changed, it could be a few days. I went home after 10pm and spent the next 3 days physically and mentally feeling like I would have my baby in those next few days.

Sunday 22 May 2022 - 37 weeks + 2 days - Birthing suite review due to bleeding

- I was advised to come in for review after I called to explain a substantial amount of blood was in the toilet bowl.
- The doctor performed a cervical check with a speculum. I advised her of what had happened with the other doctor and she said she would be gentle but her efforts did not come across as gentle. No source of the bleeding was found.
- To my surprise, this was when I was advised for the first time they will induce me as my baby was conceived via assisted reproductive technology and despite me being in the birthing suite for this review during Sunday evening, I still had to attend my antenatal appointment on Monday. I was sent home to return the next day.

Monday 23 May 2022 - 37 weeks + 3 days - Antenatal appointment

- I attended as booked. They did not have my file, it had not been returned from the birthing suite to records and then passed on to the clinic in time. They did a consult without it.
- I was advised about induction and I explained the baby was conceived via IUI not IVF. It didn't matter, it was put to me that it was hospital policy. They explained induction would be via gel insertion and they booked me in.

Monday 30 May 2022 - 38 weeks + 3 days - Antenatal appointment

- I attended as booked and asked the questions as a result of my research regarding inductions. It was explained in a simplistic way that I attend on the booked induction day, they apply the gel that night and the next day I have my baby. They did NOT explain any other induction procedures would occur and only spoke about the gel. I again stated the baby was IUI not IVF and hoped I'd go into labour on my own before the booked date but I did not.

Monday 6 June 2022 - 39 weeks + 3 days - Maternity ward for induction

- Presented to the hospital approx 3.30pm.

- Gel applied to cervix approx 6.20pm.
- Water broke at approx 8.10pm.
- I remained on the maternity ward overnight. The doctors were meant to check on me at midnight and no one did.

Tuesday 7 June 2022 - 39 weeks + 4 days - Birthing suite

- I was moved to the birthing suite in the early morning.
- I was examined by a doctor who said I was 3cm dilated and my waters had not fully broken and they broke them. I have in recent months wondered if only a doctor saw me at midnight like they were meant to, then maybe they would have broken my remaining waters then and maybe I would have been able to labour on my own and not go down the rabbit hole of medical interventions. According to the doctor, no one told them I was on the ward awaiting a consult at midnight.
- The doctor spoke of the drip to which I expressed my frustration and that I had NOT been advised of any other procedures other than the gel to which they told me I'm booked to have my baby today, so there is a bed for me to do that and there are only so many hours they have left and a c-section would be needed if I had not had him by 2.30pm. I look back at these moments now and know I was in a constant state of overwhelm, with my mind going blank at times but still trying to hold on to being me.
- The new shift change of midwives were concerned as to why I was being induced and tried to advocate for me. All I wanted was to be upright and active for my labour, and be able to use the bath. None of these things happened. I also did not want an epidural.
- The drip commenced at approx 8.50am. I could not move around like I had hoped with my lower body weak and shaking.
- After 4 hours with the drip I had to do some deep soul searching about whether or not to request an epidural. While I did decide to get the epidural, the decision meant me giving away what felt like the last thing I was holding on to that would happen my way. To this day I am proud of my efforts to adapt while being in such a vulnerable state but it crushed me, feeling like I had to hand my body over to the system.
- The epidural was given approx 2.30pm when I was approx 6-7cm dilated. I had excruciating right hip pain after this that my mum had to continually massage my hip while I rested on my left side. When I queried it or asked for something to fix it, I was told a higher dose would drag things out more, which of course I didn't want, I was so worn out by then. And the conversation between staff was about how this hip pain side effect had been common among women that week - not at all reassuring.
- I can't be sure but I think I started midwife directed pushing approx 9pm. The doctor that presented for this part was one I had not had good dealings with previously. She spoke of maybe using forceps and vacuum and I said no and told my mum who I had asked to wait outside that I would call her back in if anything changed.
- The doctor asked that I try pushing on my back which I did not want to do but I did as I was again worn out. I had no sensation at all which made things hard when I was being asked to push to where I could feel the midwives hand. I could only feel her hand resting on my thigh. I previously tried to get into a supported seated position but the midwives struggled to understand how that would work, they had not seen that before (throne

position) and I quickly realised with my no sensation due to the epidural that it might not work so they moved me into a side lying position. The transition to my back started around the time I met my third shift change of midwives in the birthing suite. Being handed over in the middle of the pushing phase was unsettling.

- My baby was born at 10.19pm. I did not know he was born. I had my eyes closed after pushing. I felt a rubbing on my chest and opened my eyes to see a blue/purplish arm and hand and hear the staff referring to the baby as "him". I asked at that moment if I gave birth to a boy. They were working to revive him on me and said they would take him to the NICU. I called mum in and they moved him from me to transport but he came through and was placed on my chest. No one explained what had happened but my discharge papers noted an APGAR score of 1 which I have only recently learnt means he could not tolerate the birthing process. A process the system created - a system that, given this experience, was ok with risking a life to do things their own way! At no point was I informed that my baby was in distress. I do suspect once he crowned, as I could see in the reflection of the midwives glasses, that he maybe was stuck for too long.
- Birthing resulted in a second degree tear and some superficial grazes to which the person stitching me up came in and commented on how much I was a mess down there and that she would make me pretty again. There was also a brief concern that not all the placenta was removed but it wasn't mentioned again.
- I was to stay in the birthing suite until the epidural wore off but I once requested to be moved to the bathroom to urinate, they showered me and moved me to the ward even with prolonged left leg weakness. This weakness remained into the next day.

Wednesday 8 June 2022 - Transferred to maternity ward

- I was moved to the ward in the early hours of the morning. I had no idea what was expected or what to do from this point on as this was my first baby. I also could not move around much due to abdominal separation and pain.

Thursday 9 June 2022 - Maternity ward

- I was awake all night unable to settle my baby. I sat most of the Wednesday night in a hard plastic chair (as it was easier to be in a chair than to get in and out of the bed), trying to keep my eyes open, feed and comfort him and not drop him.
- I had my physiotherapy review which explained why I was having so many issues with moving around and I remember saying to the physio that I could not bring myself to touch my abdomen, it didn't feel like it was a part of me anymore. She was lovely and provided me with strapping for my abdomen so I felt a little more held together and could move around a bit better.
- Mum came to the hospital that day too and took over settling my son while I showered and wrapped my midsection. We finally got my son settled and not long after staff came in to do checks on him, waking him and I cried. Mum explained he had not settled that morning and the previous night, and that I had not slept last night, the night before when I gave birth, or the night prior when I was brought in for the induction. A midwife agreed to help me with sleep that night. She encouraged co-sleeping and checked in on me and

my son often, and tried to reposition him into the bassinet a few times. I'm thankful for this midwife.

- I am also thankful for the staff from the birthing suite that I crossed paths with on the ward. Particularly one young staff member who was not there on birthing night, but was with me when they thought I was going into preterm labour at 36 weeks. She came to my bedside and said she remembered me and saw that I had been back to give birth and wanted to check in. These were the moments in a sea of uncertainty that meant more than you can know. I am actually tearing up as I write this.

Friday 10 June 2022 - Discharged from maternity ward

- I was encouraged to attend the breastfeeding class before being discharged which I did and found interesting at the time although my breastfeeding journey was short lived.

To this day, I still don't know why no psychological support is offered to women in those immediate days after giving birth. I didn't know it at the time, or for a long time after but I was in survival mode for months. It wasn't until 3 months after that I noticed my anxiety increase. By around 6 months after I realised how affected I was by everything that had happened, often having nightmares of losing my son and flashbacks to events and treatment by staff in the hospital, and moments of not feeling like I was real, like I was not here and present. I became fixated on trying to piece my story together and trying to paint a positive story as everyone seems to do. But for me spinning a positive other than to say I adapted to the events was all I could say. I often also found myself not having words to describe birth or being a mum in those early months when people asked how I was going. I quickly found that offering anything other than a positive comment or "I'm good" would trigger an unpleasant reaction and response from the enquiring party. These interactions really affected me when they happened, causing me to think more about the events and wonder what I did wrong. I also often found myself commenting to people that I understand now how birth trauma happens before realising I was impacted by the birth in that way.

Health care since birth

The below timeline provides a summary of the care I sought in the immediate postpartum period to now. During this time I was coming to terms with my baby not putting on weight and adopting mixed feeding, struggling to move around due to my 10cm abdominal separation post birth and additional, unresolved abdominal pain. I then had postpartum thyroid issues, mental health concerns, and the return of my period meant bleeding approx 2, sometimes 3 weeks a month with pain leaving me doubled over at any time of the month that I am now awaiting surgery for. Throughout the below I have noted the instances where my birth trauma impacted on my ability to consent to other medical procedures. I have since been able to have other medical procedures completed but now disclose my birth trauma by writing on whatever forms provided by health practitioners before they perform their service.

Wednesday 15 June 2022 - GP review

Wednesday 22 June 2022 - GP review

Wednesday 22 June 2022 - GP review

Wednesday 29 June 2022 - GP review
Wednesday 6 July 2022 - GP review
Tuesday 12 July 2022 - Physiotherapist - *I could not consent to the internal pelvic floor assessment part of the appointment.*
Thursday 21 July 2022 - GP 6 week review - *I could not consent to an updated cervical check.*
Thursday 18 August 2022 - GP review
Thursday 18 August 2022 - Abdominal ultrasound
Wednesday 23 August 2022 - Pelvic scan - *Broke down when provided with paperwork to consent to a transvaginal ultrasound. I could not consent and did not complete that part of the scan.*
Thursday 25 August 2022 - GP review
Monday 29 August 2022 - Physiotherapist
Monday 26 September 2022 - Physiotherapist
Thursday 8 December 2022 - GP review
Friday 16 December 2022 - Ultrasound
Friday 16 December 2022 - Psychologist
Thursday 22 December 2022 - GP review
Tuesday 17 January 2023 - GP review
Wednesday 1 February 2023 - Pelvic scan - *Consented to the transvaginal ultrasound after disclosing previous trauma.*
Wednesday 1 February 2023 - Psychologist
Wednesday 8 February 2023 - GP review
Monday 27 March 2023 - GP review
Wednesday 19 April 2023 - GP review
Friday 21 April 2023 - Psychologist
Wednesday 3 May 2023 - GP review
Wednesday 31 May 2023 - GP review
Tuesday 13 June 2023 - Gynecologist - *Consented to cervical check after disclosing previous trauma.*
Wednesday 12 July 2023 - GP review
Tuesday 18 July 2023 - Internal scan as requested by Gynecologist - *Consented to scan after disclosing previous trauma.*
Monday 24 July 2023 - Gynecologist
Wednesday 23 August 2023 - Booked for surgery

I put this timeline here to also illustrate that there is so much more that goes on after having a baby than what is often talked about. While I know it's very individual, I was a fit and healthy 34 year old who made the decision to become a solo mother by choice and I never imagined I'd still be dealing with health concerns up until this present day. Over these 14 months since birth, I've pushed through in order to care for my son and have been fortunate to have support from my family. While not all my health issues are now directly linked to the birth, recovering from birth does not end at the 6 week GP review, in fact at 6 weeks post birth I was still bleeding and continued to bleed until 10-12 weeks post birth. More support with a holistic and trauma-informed approach is needed for women!