

Submission  
No 987

## INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

**Name:** Name suppressed

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Partially  
Confidential

My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I live in \_\_\_\_\_. I am 37 years old and I have a three and a half year old boy named \_\_\_\_\_ and a two year old boy \_\_\_\_\_.

For my first birth, I went through the private system at \_\_\_\_\_ Private with an obstetrician based in \_\_\_\_\_, giving birth on 10/12/2019. My second birth was through \_\_\_\_\_ Public Hospital, giving birth in the Delta lockdown on 16/08/2021.

My first birth resulted in birth-related trauma, due to the way I was treated by my obstetrician. I prepared for a natural birth, however ended up with an emergency caesarean after 23 hours in labour. I was healthy, had no complications with my pregnancy, and was considered low risk. I found I had to push back very hard against my obstetrician in relation to being induced at 39 weeks, for no reason other than 'that's the best evidence'. I am tertiary educated, and had informed myself through various birthing books and courses, and decided that a natural birth with minimal intervention was how I wanted to proceed.

I went into natural labour at about 7am, and it progressed slowly. By 8pm I had my waters broken, after which I was no longer able to tolerate the pain using just gas. I received an epidural at about 8.30pm, after which my labour continued to progress, reaching 10cms about midnight (after 22 hours in labour).

Around this time, the midwife on shift made us aware that she had concerns about the baby's heart rate dropping periodically, and had contacted the obstetrician about it. Sometime after this, the midwife told me that The obstetrician had reviewed the heart rate graphs, and had determined that the umbilical cord was being impacted by the contractions, causing the heart rate to go down but then rise again to normal upon completion of the contraction. I was explicitly told by the midwife that the obstetrician had determined the risk to be minimal, and that I could continue to have a vaginal birth. I attempted on various occasions to push as I entered the second phase of labour.

About 1.30am on 10/12/19, The obstetrician entered the room in a manner which could only be described as hostile. He conducted another check, and then said:

*"That's it, the writings on the wall. You need to have a caesar unless you want a sick, distressed or dead baby and I don't want any argument about it".*

From an emotional perspective, I became completely distressed after hearing I could have a dead baby. I began to cry and became distraught. My partner was in the room as well as my mother. My partner told the obstetrician that no one had explained to us any reason as to why I would need a caesar. The obstetrician said:

*"Well that's obstetrics, the baby's not coming down and he can't stay there. I'll see if a vacuum will work but if not we need to do a caesarean."*

He then thrust a piece of paper in front of me, told me to read and sign it. He asked if I had any questions, and I asked about what anaesthetic would be used. He replied *"That's a question for the anaesthetist"* and walked out of the room. I would describe his manner throughout the whole interaction as impatient, hostile and aggressive. There was no clear communication with me as to why the caesarean was necessary, particularly given I had been told not long before that the baby's heart

rate was not a concern and that I would have a natural birth. I was wheeled to the operating theatre where I had an emergency caesarean.

The anaesthetist was excellent throughout the procedure, communicating with me about the process and ensuring I understood, and I have written a letter of thanks to him. The obstetrician didn't say another word to me thereafter to my recollection. My son was born at 3am, healthy with no issues.

Later that day in the afternoon, The obstetrician checked on my wound. At this point, my partner tried to engage him and ask him to clarify what had occurred because we still had no clarity about the exact reason for the caesar. At that point, the obstetrician exploded with open hostility towards both of us. He said, to the best of my recollection:

*"You should have listened when I told you to be induced at 39 weeks. Just because you read something you think you know; anyone can read the manual on how to fly a 747 but no one wants to land it. It's not just about you - because of you I had to call my whole team out last night, I had to drive home afterwards tired which impacts my family. And I've had to give sub-standard care to all my patients today because I'm tired."*

I asked him *'Do all your patients get induced at 39 weeks?'*

He replied *'That's the best evidence....'*

I repeated *'Do all your patients get induced at 39 weeks?'* and he said *'no'*.

I then said *'Well you seem to have a real problem with it'*.

He stormed out not long after this. At that point, my husband and I decided he was completely unreasonable and that we would not engage him any further, even though we had questions about what had happened medically for a caesarean to occur. I would describe The obstetrician's manner during this interaction as hostile, impatient, aggressive and almost enraged.

The conversation left me feeling numb. I was extremely vulnerable, in pain and in a state of distress about what had occurred. From that point, all I wanted to do was leave the hospital so I wouldn't have to see the obstetrician again. His daily checks were a source of great anxiety to me, and I tried to avoid speaking to him as much as possible. I told one of the midwives what had occurred, and she encouraged me to make a complaint to the ward manager, however I didn't feel emotionally able to do so at the time. The nursing staff saw me crying and breaking down frequently the next few days.

The whole experience left me feeling distraught. I consider myself a resilient and robust individual, but when the obstetrician said to me, after 24 hours in labour, that I would have a *'...dead baby'* it put me in so much distress and fear that I completely broke. His dehumanising treatment of me throughout the birth process and afterwards was absolutely shattering for me, at a time which should have been one of the happiest of my life. I have proactively sought counselling since the birth to help resolve the trauma I feel about it.

I feel the obstetrician's communication with me was atrocious and completely inappropriate. At no point did he communicate to us the reason for the caesarean, despite us explicitly asking. I understand that in an emergency situation detailed explanations cannot be proffered, as action must be the first priority to resolve the risk. However, I still believe at least a basic level of

explanation must be given to the patient, so they understand roughly why a course of action such as major surgery is to be taken.

I firmly believe the obstetrician's attitude towards me stemmed from the fact I didn't want to be induced at 39 weeks, which he appeared to take as an affront to his authority. I was considered low risk and had no issues throughout my pregnancy, and to want a natural birth is not an outlandish desire in my opinion. Women have a right to choose and have input into their own bodies and the way they will give birth. Of course this has to give way to necessity in emergency situations, but I believe the hostility coming from the obstetrician was due to the fact I didn't follow his orders and have the birth the way he wanted to dictate. The medical system bullies women with intervention at its centre – this is where the problems start and to deny there is a cascade of intervention is to deny the evidence. Why some women are treated horrendously by health professionals when giving birth is completely inexplicable and should not be tolerated. Women are huge contributors to society, in what they give up to have children and the way they are the souls of their families. Society and the health system owe them a great deal more respect than is currently being shown – respect to choose and be treated with dignity and humanity.

I made a complaint to the HCCC about the treatment from my obstetrician. They informed me the obstetrician was spoken to but that no wrongdoing was found. I was not satisfied at this outcome. I also made a complaint to Private Hospital.

My second birth through the public system was much more positive. I wasn't able to get on the MGP program, despite my prior trauma and despite wanting a VBAC – there weren't enough places. This should be the standard women are offered for their birth experience!

I was lucky enough to get fairly regular appointments with a good midwife in the public system, whose views of birth aligned with mine. Again, I was considered low risk except for the fact I wanted a VBAC. I had to fight the entire system to achieve a VBAC with no intervention. I had various extremely tense appointments with differing obstetricians at the hospital, who all wanted to induce me at 39 weeks. I fought and pushed back with every ounce of strength that I had, to the point I skipped appointments in the later stages because I was sick of the confrontation. I did even more research and informed myself further to be able to push back against the medical system who did not want me to have a VBAC, despite it being far more cost effective for the health care system.

I was lucky enough to see a very experienced midwife who specialises in birth trauma. She assisted me to work through and understand the trauma from my first birth even further than my psychologist, and I found her support and knowledge an overwhelming support.

I went into labour naturally again at 40 + 4 (resisting the pressure for an induction as best I could). I had a 13 hour natural labour without any pain relief. I achieved my VBAC through a vacuum assisted birth, and had a positive experience because I was listened to and respected by the medical professionals assisting me.

Our birth system is failing women everywhere in Australia. Society these days expects women to give up their careers, have children, fall behind financially but then get back to work and look after babies and children. How one can do this after suffering trauma is unbelievable, and can affect the bond between a mother and her children, sometimes for life. We are demanding better for ourselves, and the governments of the day would do well to listen.