

Submission  
No 988

## INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

**Name:** Mrs Katie Gallagher

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Partially  
Confidential

Dear Committee,

I'd like to share my birth experience with you.

My name is Katie Gallagher and I am 28 years old. I live in \_\_\_\_\_ and birthed my son 22 months ago at \_\_\_\_\_ Public Hospital.

I was so excited to be pregnant. Being a Mum was my greatest dream. As soon as I found out I was pregnant, I applied to the Midwifery Group Practice program. I was about 4 weeks pregnant when I applied, but I missed out on a spot. I really wanted that continuity of care, and as a first time Mum with no family living nearby, I know being in the MGP would have been hugely beneficial for me. I opted for GP shared care and paid for a doula to support me during my pregnancy, birth and postpartum.

I struggled a lot in pregnancy. I was anxious, nauseous, sore and overwhelmed. It wasn't a 'bad' pregnancy, but the physical and emotional changes were hard for me to cope with. I already had clinically diagnosed anxiety and depression. It was lockdown at the time and I was working as a news reporter hearing about the covid doom and gloom every day. I spoke to my GP about my anxiety and while she was lovely, she just referred me to PANDA. I felt like I slipped through the cracks during my pregnancy. I struggled trying to keep up with remembering what appointments I needed to make at what time with which person. It was my GP for this week, then a hospital OB the next time, then my GP then a different OB and maybe a midwife thrown in. Each OB told me different things, there was constant confusion between scans and tests. The hospital midwife told me I needed to get some letter from my GP about my anti-D, and then the GP had no idea what I was talking about and then in the end I didn't need a letter at all. I was so confused and lost my entire pregnancy and never felt prepared by my health professionals.

At 37 weeks and 5 days my waters broke after days of regular Braxton Hicks and period-like cramping. I was having mild contractions, and called the hospital. They told me I needed to come in to be examined but my husband wasn't allowed to come with me. I was a first time Mum, in early labour, in lockdown with NO support person with me while I sat in birth suite, alone. The OB came in and told me they would see me tomorrow to be induced. I did not want to be induced. I wanted a natural, spontaneous labour and birth. Because my waters broke before labour was established, I was pressured to be induced to prevent infection. I felt that if I was left alone, my labour would progress with no interventions.

The following day I agreed to go to the hospital again for monitoring, but I didn't want to be induced. I asked again if my husband could come with me and they agreed. Well, as soon as I walked into birth suite my contractions completely died down. What was meant to be a quick check and maybe some oral antibiotics to take home ended up being me in a birth suite with my husband for around seven hours. Neither one of us was offered any food or water until we'd been there for at least six hours. My labour had completely stalled. The OB and midwife would check me periodically and then get called away. I was exhausted and wanted to go home. I was hungry, scared and stressed and my husband and I got into an argument because we were so overwhelmed. The OB said to me (words to this effect), "Look the chances of a spontaneous labour are getting lower, and the chance of infection is rising. If you do get an infection, your baby will have to go to the NICU, and that will be bad for bonding and breastfeeding, and we don't want that to happen." I burst into tears because I just wanted to be labouring at home and instead I was stuck in this hospital with a totally stalled labour and now I was fretting that if I advocated for the birth I wanted, I would be responsible for my baby's illness. I was spiralling and because I was so anxious my blood pressure was high so then I had to be

tested for preeclampsia and that made my anxiety worse. It was horrible. I felt so alone, so vulnerable, so frustrated and trapped. I had to advocate for myself SO HARD and I was exhausted, with what felt like no one in my corner. I wanted some more time for labour to establish, so the OB told me I could stay in and be induced then and there, or come back the next day in the morning if labour didn't kick off overnight. She said she would prefer I get induced that night because they had more staff and tomorrow they would be under resourced, but acknowledged that was her problem not mine. I agreed that was not my problem and told her I would come back the next day.

Fortunately my labour kicked off overnight and my husband and doula supported me at home. The hospital called me every few hours wanting me to come in, but each time I said no and stayed at home until I felt ready. When it was time for me to go into the hospital, our doula wasn't allowed to accompany us. I was so disappointed I couldn't have the birth support I had hired.

When I got to the hospital, in established labour, I had to answer all the covid questions 'do you have covid symptoms? Have you been to a hotspot? Etc.' in between my regular contractions. When I explained I was in labour they let me go to birth suite. Once I got to birth suite, they asked to do a vaginal examination, even though I had made it clear in my birth preferences that I didn't want any VEs. I said I would rather not have one, but the midwife said I really needed to have one and I was too tired to advocate for myself anymore, so I let her check me. She said she could still feel some of my waters hadn't broken and asked if I would like her to break them to speed up the labour, but warned it would be more intense. It had been days of on/off labour at this point. I said yes, and I dilated so rapidly that the pain was unbearable. I remember thinking to myself that I was going to knock myself unconscious because I could not stand the pain. It was so intense, I couldn't stop vomiting (and I have a phobia of vomiting) and I wanted to die. In hindsight, I wish our doula was there and could have advocated for me, and helped me make a more informed decision around the breaking of my waters. If I could go back, I would have said no.

I had an epidural (even though my preference was not to have one- I was in too much distress to go on without pain relief), and once it was time for my son to be born, he ended up getting stuck. He was delivered via forceps and an episiotomy. I suffered a mild post-partum haemorrhage and my son was born in mild respiratory distress. He ended up being taken to the special care nursery and given antibiotics. I didn't get to bond with him straight after birth. I didn't get that special first breastfeed. I didn't get to gaze at his little face for our first night together. I was taken to a room in maternity to sleep, without my baby. When I went to visit him once the epidural wore off, he was covered in cords and patches. I didn't know how he was going to be fed without me. I was confused and lost, again. I tried to ask how I was going to breastfeed him if he wasn't in my room. How would I know if he was hungry? But the midwives told me to have a sleep and they'd call me in the morning to visit the nursery and feed.

I hated my stay in Hospital and couldn't wait to get home. The midwives were lovely, but so rushed and under resourced. I actually brought my own pain relief so I didn't have to bother them. When my son didn't sleep and cried and cried all night, I didn't ask for help until 5am because I didn't want to bother the already busy nurses. I wanted to go home so my husband could help me during the nights. I was in a shared room and felt like I had no privacy. I experienced pelvic floor injury and was incontinent for the days following my birth. I was so embarrassed to be in this vulnerable state with another woman and her husband in my room. Breastfeeding was challenging and painful. Once I was discharged, the community nurse identified that my son had a significant tongue tie that was causing the pain. It had been noted on my hospital documents but no midwife had thought to tell me. I had no idea. Once we saw a private lactation consultant and had it revised, breastfeeding was much easier.

I am now at the stage where I am considering a second child, but I am scared to go through it again. I know I won't get into MGP and I'll have to do another model of care. I would love to have a homebirth with a private midwife so I can avoid the hospital as much as possible, but we just can't afford that. I don't want to have another birth like my first again. I don't want to feel pressured and alone and while I know birth is painful, I don't want to feel that awful terror, that intensity of pain that made me want to die. My husband is terrified of the idea of me having a homebirth after our experience. He has a fear that I will die in childbirth or our baby will be unwell and need care, because that's what happened to our son. This has been a source of tension and debate in our marriage because although I think a private midwife would lead to better birth outcomes, he's too scared to not be at a hospital, because he now believes birth is dangerous.

I would love to see some changes in the NSW maternity system because I will always feel sad and let down by the birth I had and the way I was treated.

Kind regards,

Katie Gallagher