

Submission  
No 992

## INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

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**Date Received:** 10 August 2023

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Partially  
Confidential

I, Emma Bonkain, have had three births with 2 being traumatic. These births have had lasting effects on me psychologically and have affected my relationship with my husband, children and myself as well as my trust in the current health system.

My first birth took place at [redacted] Hospital in 2016. During my pregnancy there was no continuity of care. Most of my care was overseen by the midwives (the only option I had available as I was told) which I saw a different midwife for each appointment. It was discovered I had low PAPP-A which I was recommended to have extra scans and everything was smooth sailing. As my 40 week mark came closer I was booked in with an obstetrician at [redacted] Hospital who recommended an induction as he was concerned that my daughter may have been on the smaller size. I wasn't overly comfortable with this but as a first time mum I trusted the Doctors recommendation and I was booked in.

My husband arrived at the hospital and was taken to the maternity ward for my induction. Our room was next door to another woman who had been brought in for an induction. I had gel applied and then it was a waiting game. The woman next door was progressing and sounded as though she was in a lot of pain. The nurses kept making comments about how she was being over the top and making smart comments about she wasn't being normal. The comments made me feel uncomfortable and concerned for my own labour and whether they would think I was being "over the top" and "ridiculous". The first application of gel hadn't brought on my labour so they reapplied it around 9pm. From there I had small cramping and contractions on and off until the early hours of the morning where they ramped up quickly. The midwives gave me saline injections in my lower back which helped take the pain from my back. The midwives checked my dilation around 3am and I was 4cm dilated. From then my contractions were coming hard and fast and the pain was becoming unbearable and I was continually vomiting. I asked the midwives several times for pain relief and they gave me a tablet which I vomited back up almost immediately. I was told I couldn't have any more because they didn't know how much my body had absorbed (the tablet was whole in my vomit) and that they could get me a wafer to stop my vomiting. I had the wafer and my vomiting ceased but then my body began to push naturally. One of the midwives told me to stop pushing that I wasn't at that point yet. I told her I couldn't help it that my body was just doing it to which she rolled her eyes and walked out of the room. My body kept pushing and I was in the shower trying to keep my pain levels down. A different midwife came and offered to set the gas up for me. I said yes and she asked if I felt like I needed to push. I said yes to both and she sent a different midwife to get the gas while she did a cervical exam. When she checked she could see my daughters head. The other midwife arrived with the gas at this point and was told "we need to get her down to birthing". They covered me with a sheet, completely naked underneath, told me "Don't push in the hallway" and wheeled me down the hall to the birthing room. They asked if I could transfer over to the other bed which I replied I wasn't sure. I stood up off the maternity bed and delivered my daughter standing up with the Doctor (who I had never met before) coming in just in time to catch my daughter at 4.51am. The midwives at [redacted] Hospital didn't believe me when I was telling them I was further along than they believed I should be. My requests for assistance came across as a bother to them. Because of this I had to refrain from pushing when my body was screaming for me to. I felt humiliated and belittled.

The aftercare support for a first time mum at the hospital wasn't much better. My daughter wasn't latching properly during feeding. The support that was offered was a nipple shield and to visit an Australian Breastfeeding Association meeting if I needed help. I was shown how to put it on right before leaving the hospital (the afternoon of my daughter's birth) and that was it. I didn't know how long to use it for or what signs to look out for if it was no longer needed. I stayed in hospital until the afternoon of my daughter's birth and in that time heard several midwives talking about how many inductions the Doctor overseeing me had scheduled prior to the Easter weekend to which it was stated that he was going away. It really makes me wonder if I needed to be induced or whether my

induction fitted his schedule because my daughter wasn't undersized and was a healthy 3.43kg at birth.

My second child I had a [redacted] Hospital in 2018 and had a wonderful experience. The continuity of care was amazing and the Doctor and midwives were amazingly supportive and caring. My wishes were listened to and they did their utmost to make sure I was alright before, during and after birth. I was planning on having my youngest daughter at [redacted] Hospital in 2021 as well due to this.

When I attended my first antenatal appointment at [redacted] Hospital in 2020 I was told by the midwives that my BMI was on the higher end and that I needed to keep my weight gain during this pregnancy to the minimum. I was given information about a government run healthy lifestyles program that gave phone consultations and booked in straight away as I did not want to be sent to [redacted] Hospital. After having precipitous births with both of my previous children the thought of having to travel over an hour to get to the hospital was terrifying, especially when I was previously allowed to birth at [redacted] hospital

The rest of my pregnancy was uncomplicated and as my due date came closer I was told that I would need to have an appointment with the [redacted] Antenatal Clinic. I did not want to attend, however I was keen to get everyone off my back about it. This is a decision I regret. I was told by the doctor there that I would need to be booked in for an induction at 40 weeks because of my BMI, despite having a healthy pregnancy, I had put on the least amount of weight in all of my pregnancies and previously had healthy, yet precipitous labours. I was devastated, especially since other mothers known to me in [redacted] were allowed to give birth at [redacted] hospital even with high BMI's, geriatric pregnancies and other things also considered "high risk".

When back with my OB in [redacted] for my next appointment I told him I didn't want to go to [redacted] for an induction (my first daughter was induced and it was not an experience I wanted to go through again). He came up with a plan to do weekly stretch and sweeps once I hit 49 weeks. Between appointments I tried everything I possibly could to put myself into labour. Each week that went past my stress levels increased as I didn't want to go to [redacted]. In the meantime I had [redacted] calling me constantly about coming in for other appointments and to book my induction. When I told them I didn't want to attend they were incredibly pushy, to the point I no longer answered my phone when they rang. No one from [redacted] Hospital would give me an accurate reason why they were pushing for an induction. I would get told different reasons each time ranging from BMI to precipitous labours and to being overdue.

When I was close to 41 weeks my OB in [redacted], Dr [redacted], booked me in to have my membranes ruptured at [redacted] Hospital. I was happy to have this happen if it meant I didn't have to go to [redacted]. On assessment however my daughter had shifted back up and was no longer down low enough to do a membrane rupture. He then told me I would have to be booked in to have an induction that Saturday at [redacted] Hospital. Dr [redacted] was also going to be away that weekend. I was devastated.

Saturday came around, despite yet again trying everything to get my daughter engaged again and get myself into labour. The whole way to [redacted] hospital I kept telling my husband that I wanted to turn around and go home, I should have listened to my gut instinct.

When we arrived on Saturday the 22nd of May 2021 my husband and I were put into a birthing suite as they had a bed shortage. I had a beautiful midwife check me in and put in a cannula in case it was needed. She gave me an internal exam and informed us that I didn't fit the requirements for a gel induction which I had previously with my first daughter and didn't want again. She left my husband and I in the birthing suite and we were encouraged to get some rest and that the doctors would reassess me in the morning and most likely break my waters.

On the morning of the 23rd of May 202, Dr [redacted] and Dr [redacted] came to assess me and break my waters. I was given an ultrasound and Dr [redacted] spoke poorly to Dr [redacted], snatching the ultrasound equipment off her. After the ultrasound they decided I needed an internal examination. Dr [redacted] gave me one first and then Dr [redacted]. Dr [redacted] was rough and the exam made me physically crawl up the bed to get away from him. When he was told by my husband and I that it was painful he continued the exam and then showed no sympathy or sense of apology. I was then told by Dr [redacted] that my daughter was yet again too high to rupture my membrane and that I would have to have cervidil applied. I expressed my concern about this and was told by Dr [redacted] that I would either have to have the cervidil applied or hang around [redacted] until I went into labor. I explained we couldn't stay in [redacted] until the birth, that we had two young children at home and that we would have to stay in accomodation which we couldn't afford to do. He said something along the lines of "the decision is made then" and then instructed Dr [redacted] to apply the cervidil. I was still in a lot of pain for the cervidil and needed to use gas for the cervidil to be applied. I felt as though I had no choice in the matter and the cervidil application began before I had a chance to object. Section 61I of the Crimes Act NSW states that "Any person who has sexual intercourse with another person without the consent of the other person and who knows that the other person does not consent to the sexual intercourse is liable to imprisonment for 14 years." My lack of consent does not place this experience in the category of "penetration carried out solely for proper medical or hygienic purposes is not "sexual intercourse" for the purposes of this Division."

Dr [redacted] and Dr [redacted] left the room and I fell apart and couldn't stop crying. My midwife [redacted] was amazingly caring and comforted me, turned down the lights and monitored the situation from a distance to give my husband and I some space. My husband told [redacted] that he did not want Dr [redacted] in the room or putting his hands on me again. [redacted] respected our wishes and when Dr [redacted] came to check my progress later and rupture my membranes she sent him away, saying I would prefer a female Dr from a previous bad experience (which was from his interaction earlier).

My labour steadily progressed and Dr [redacted] came back to rupture my membranes after couldn't quite reach. Dr [redacted] made a comment to a different midwife in front of me about how she didn't know why they were still rupturing my membranes when my labor was progressing so well. She broke my waters and the other midwife who was with her offered for me to have the heart rate monitor attached to my daughters head so I wouldn't need to be strapped to my belly. I agreed as I was finding the band uncomfortable already. When she went to apply the heart rate monitor the pain made me crawl up the bed again and I yelled stop, stop, stop! She replied with "I nearly have it" and continued to attempt to apply it, to which I yelled stop again. She thankfully did and apologised profusely then and on another occasion when she entered the room. During the other occasion one of the midwives asked her if she "did a Dr [redacted]".

My labour progressed quickly from there and I kept trying to push the heart rate monitor away from my body as the feel of it on me was almost painful. The midwives kept putting it back. I birthed my beautiful, healthy baby girl. Afterwards my aftercare went smoothly, I stayed at [redacted] hospital overnight in the birthing suite due to bed shortages and then in the morning was transferred to [redacted] Hospital by my husband.

After my birthing experience I contacted [redacted] Hospital and put in a complaint about Dr [redacted]. I had [redacted], the manager of clinical governance, email me back and then had a missed call from the hospital on the 24th of June which apparently was Dr [redacted] calling to talk and apologise. I was in the middle of washing my children and could not answer the phone. [redacted] then emailed me to apologise on Dr [redacted]' behalf. I emailed back and told her I did not require any further contact because I mentally couldn't handle the stress.

My mental health suffered from this event. I had extreme flashbacks and altered sleep. At my 6 week check-up I asked for a referral to see a psychologist. I had several zoom appointments with her

and was told that I just "need to push past it". I stopped attending. Over the next nearly 12 months I got very little sleep, the flashbacks increased, I resented my husband and daughter for what happened and I could no longer be sexually intimate with my husband as it would cause flashbacks.

I contacted [redacted] again just before my daughter's first birthday, restating why I was effected from the experience, how I was effected and then asked what disciplinary action Dr [redacted] received, asked for a formal written apology and asked what protocols were put into place to prevent other mothers from going through what I did. I did receive a formal written apology from Dr [redacted] which left a bit to be desired. I also requested my medical records from my time in [redacted] hospital. During a 24hr period I had 11 internal examinations. Not all of these were documented. The attempt to attach the heart rate monitor to my baby wasn't recorded. My painful exam from Dr [redacted] was not stated there and neither was the fact that I needed gas for all following examinations after Dr [redacted]'s.

I attended an EMDR session with a different psychologist in June 2022 which assisted in the flashbacks and my altered sleep. Since then I have been coping reasonably well until I needed to attend [redacted] in February of this year. As we pulled into the hospital car park for an ultrasound for my injured ankle I had my first panic attack. Everytime we drive near [redacted] Hospital I panic and for that reason we now going near the hospital when in [redacted].

I was not informed of the risks and effects of the internal examinations or the application of the Cervidil. I was forced and rushed into having the Cervidil inserted, with it being inserted while Dr [redacted] was telling me that they would be applying the Cervidil. I had already expressed to midwives I was concerned of any gel being used however I felt this was not taken into consideration at all. I feel like I wasn't able to participate in the decision making involving the birth of my daughter. That experience plus all of the internal examinations, the two extremely painful examinations and lack of empathy and compassion has affected me greatly for over 2 years now. The apologies I have received from [redacted] and Dr [redacted] have seemed insincere and as though they were only performed as a matter of course, because they were required to.

I understand that other people have gone through larger birth traumas than myself, however my trauma causes me pain and anguish every day. My pain is relevant. My pain is real. I really hope those of us affected reliving some of our worst moments over again to be heard actually makes a difference to the failing health system that is supposed to be supporting birthing mothers. Action needs to be taken in providing women centred care where women are heard, supported and cared for respectfully. Doctors and Midwives need to be capable of compassion and empathy, or they shouldn't be in those positions of power. We as a society need and can do better for women during their most vulnerable time of their life.