

Submission
No 1088

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Dear Members of the Committee,

I am writing to share my personal experiences and perspectives on behalf of women who have encountered birth trauma. As a woman who has personally experienced birth trauma I hope to shed light on the impact it can have on individuals and families.

I, _____ have experienced birth trauma firsthand.

The specifics of my own encounter with birth trauma are as follows:

We were meant to have a natural birth at a midwife led birth unit attached to a small hospital but following complications had a vaginal delivery with episiotomy and forceps leading to 12 days in 2 hospitals which was not in our plan and we were not prepared for.

Hospital experiences that lead to my birth trauma:

- Approx 15 people were in the room when I birthed as staff were setting up for the next birth. I had planned to have a water birth/ as natural as possible with just my partner and midwife present
- Trainee staff – my episiotomy and forceps delivery was carried out by a trainee. Also the rounds done the next day when talking to me by doctors always had at least 4 extra student doctors with them. At such a fragile time when the birth type was not planned seems an inappropriate time for trainees to be involved and informed consent was vulnerable at this time
- After delivery my partner and baby went to special care. I was wheeled out in the bed into a corridor where I waited for some time (they were trying to find a room for me I think). There was a nurse sat with me. When I finally got a room I was examined and my catheter had kinked resulting in my bladder being stretched. I had had a spinal block so couldn't feel anything. The 2 nurses that were there clearly didn't get on and were bickering and arguing while examining me, one blaming the other for not checking me properly. I encountered these 2 arguing in my presence a few times.
- My baby was on CPAP when I first held her and tried to breast feed her. How this worked was not explained to me and when I tried to feed her the machine stopped making noise and I thought she couldn't breathe. I didn't want to try to feed her after this as I found it distressing
- We were transferred to the nearest hospital with a NICU the day after my daughter was born. I was unable to travel in the ambulance with my baby so my partner had to drive us. I still had a catheter in and I realised it needed to be emptied so we had to pull in at a McDonalds to use the bathroom. It was a surreal moment that stays with me as exactly where I shouldn't have been the day after giving birth and without my baby
- I had to readmit myself to the hospital we had been transferred to as I still had a catheter. I had to wait for approx an hour in a wait room to see someone. It was 5pm

(we'd left the other hospital in the morning) before I got a bed and was able to go see my baby in NICU

- We had multiple negative experiences with one nurse on the maternity ward. She mocked my partner for not being able to find a light switch (which was in an awkward place), asked me if my baby was in NICU or special care- I didn't know the difference but knew how to walk from my room to where my baby was. She exclaimed 'you don't know where your baby is?!' in a disapproving manner. On my first attempt of pumping milk she encouraged me increase the suction. When I told her it was painful she said 'some women can push through the pain for their babies'. I therefore 'pushed through' resulting in me ripping the skin off around my nipples which was painful and led to further breastfeeding issues.
- We were told in very clinical terms what had happened to our baby with not much explanation as to what that meant. She had had a stroke at birth but no one could tell us exactly when or why and we still don't know to this day. I didn't even really know what a stroke was. We were shown an MRI of her brain and the area affected and told she would have some level of disability, but no one could tell us anything other than that. We had no idea what her level of functioning would be and no one would give us any indication.
- While in NICU and special care the nurses were constantly concerned about the baby being cold. I felt a pressure to leave her in her incubator. We had one day where we had lots of skin to skin and we felt good about finally starting to spend more time together and then the nurse putting her back in the incubator said she's far too cold as if we'd done something wrong (myself and the baby had been covered in blankets the whole time). After that I felt like I should only get her out for feeding, bathing and nappy changes
- The lactation consultation was in high demand and it was rare I got to see her. I remember seeing her and feeling rushed to try and get my baby to latch properly. I was in a very uncomfortable chair which made my episiotomy stitches very painful and I remember the experience being stressful and painful. We were encouraged early on to use a nipple shield which I feel was for convenience and I regret as we ended up only being able to feed with the nipple shield which made feeding difficult. We had a difficult breastfeeding journey which I put down to a lack of bonding at the start, using a nipple shield and constant pressure from nurses, doctors and paediatricians for my baby to gain weight as she was at a low percentile. This meant I used pumping and formula for top ups and was encouraged to start solids at 4 months
- I definitely submitted to just following what the nurses told me to do in special care, like following the precise feeding schedule they gave me instead of on demand. I always felt like I was doing something wrong as every nurse had their own system which I didn't know how to follow and that they were lightly telling me off. After 8 days in the hospital, I broke down to one of the nurses saying everyone was expecting something different of us and we're exhausted. After that the nurses were a lot more positive and encouraging with what we were doing. I wish I'd stood up for myself earlier but also don't feel that I should have had to.
- Us leaving hospital was fully dependent on how much weight our baby was gaining, and she wasn't gaining it quick enough. Both myself and my partner are slim and im short so looking back of course our baby was too. It felt like we were trapped and were never going to get to leave. This meant we were bottle feeding formula more than we would have liked (I wanted to only breastfeed) and I was pumping as much as I could. My partner was staying with his mother 30 mins away and I was sleeping on the day bed in the hospital as we live an hour away from the hospital.

- Financial stress of having to stay in the hospital was a factor. Knowing my partner would have to go back to work as soon as possible was stressful and the idea of having to care for a disabled baby solo during the days was overwhelming. I was waiting for my permanent residency to be approved and therefore could not claim any maternity support from the government meaning our only income was from my partner's work

What my birth trauma looked like:

- Waking up each day with a sense of dread of how we would get through the day
- Counting down until my partner would get home from work
- Feeling numb with a lack of joy and happiness
- High levels of anxiety – feeling in a constant state of flight or fight
- Exhaustion
- Unable to communicate well with others. I could not organise my sentences well leading to a feeling of disconnection and anxiety in social settings
- Depression – just wanting it all to stop or go away
- Feeling overwhelmed by the multiple hospital appointments, scheduling and having to navigate the NDIS system with little to no help and not knowing who to contact
- Unable to concentrate and remember details which lead to feelings of inadequacy as a parent and not doing enough to support my child's medical needs
- Extreme feelings of anger
- Extreme stress when my baby cried
- Visual flashes of me hurting my baby or other people hurting my baby eg. On a walk visualising myself pushing the pram into the river, someone snatching the baby out of the pram and throwing her
- Panic attacks started 3 years after birth, I suspect as a result of prolonged stress exposure
- Deciding not to have any more children

Drawing from my personal journey, I would like to propose specific solutions and changes to enhance maternity care in Australia, with the aim of preventing future instances of birth trauma. The following are the changes I advocate for:

A holistic approach to birthing; in my opinion there are currently 2 camps- natural birth or medical birth. Neither of these systems worked for us and I don't understand why there's not a happy medium where my options and opinions were respected while being able to access the medical care we required without having to forgo my views and opinions and only the medical professionals view is respected and they hold all the power.

More education during pregnancy into what could occur during birth so women can feel empowered to make informed decisions at birth and beyond.

First time mothers being treated respectfully and their thoughts and wishes not being dismissed.

Assistance in navigating the medical system and NDIS. One key person to contact to direct new mothers to the help they need so they don't feel overwhelmed.

Extra mental health support.

Thank you for considering my submission. I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute my experiences and viewpoints to the committee's ongoing inquiry. If necessary, I am willing to provide additional evidence during a hearing to further support my perspective.

With sincere appreciation,