

Submission
No 1149

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

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Partially
Confidential

To the Select Committee on Birth Trauma

I would like to share my personal experience of birth trauma with the committee and the causes and factors that contributed to my experience.

I gave birth at _____ in June 2022

The birth of my child at the time and the weeks that followed felt as though it went well, however as time passed and I reflected, I realised it was not at the pregnancy or birth I had hoped for.

When I first found out I was pregnant, I found the process of searching for an obstetrician quite overwhelming. Without knowing much about having a baby or what it meant I had no idea what I was looking for in a doctor, midwife, or doula (not that I even knew what a doula was).

After a discussion with my doctor about some of the possible options of care we decided we would use an obstetrician at my chosen hospital that also happened to deliver my sisters 3 children. We agreed the expense would be worth the investment for both me and our future baby, especially as he is well known for obstetrics, gynaecology, and pelvic health.

Once the appointments with the obstetrician commenced, they were regular and short; each visit involving a quick chat about how I was feeling, a blood pressure reading and a quick ultrasound to monitor the baby's movements. We'd discuss if there was any need for any blood tests or ultrasounds and that would be it. My partner and I thought there was very little information on how to prepare for the next stages; unfortunately getting information from the doctor was like pulling teeth, we had to actively ask questions to obtain any information, but because it was so new and overwhelming to us, we didn't really know what questions to ask. I naively assumed all the information I needed to know for now was being given, and when the time is right, he would prepare/tell us. Now I reflect I know that I was naïve in believing I was prepared enough mentally and physically for the birth.

From 20 weeks on I was advised to see a physio to assess my pelvic health. She advised me to strengthen my pelvic muscles and massage my perineum in preparation for the vaginal delivery. She did not show me how to strengthen my muscles or what the consequences were of a weak pelvic floor and tearing. She did not ask me about any family history of prolapse (there was my mother who'd had a hysterectomy at 37) or any repeat visits to check on how my pelvic floor strength was progressing in the lead up to my due date.

At my next visit with the obstetrician there was no discussion on how my visit with the physio went or recommendation for a return visit or any suggestions aside from perineum massages on how to prepare for the actual day. He would send information leaflets to my email for me read in my own time and if I had any questions to ask them on my next visit. The leaflets mostly spoke about episiotomies and induction. One of the leaflets had birthing stories, in which spoke of a woman who had developed pelvic organ prolapse which I read over quickly not even comprehending what that meant.

The hospital offered a birthing class which we attended via zoom, I had no idea you could do these elsewhere. Knowing what I know now after birthing my baby, the course was very basic, it mostly spoke about what the hospital offered, some basic information on some of the pain relief offered and how to wrap, and feed your baby.

When we made it to 40 weeks there was a bit of worry my placenta wasn't; doing its job, it was advised if baby didn't arrive by Saturday (41 weeks) we should strongly consider being induced.

Again I was given a leaflet on the 4 different ways of being induced. I was told what time to come to the hospital and no information on how exactly they would induce me. Unfortunately, it was my OB's weekend off so I was left in the hands of another OB whom I had never met. Being nervous and mostly excited to meet our little one we went to the hospital where I was told they would apply a gel, and depending on how I responded they would maybe need to apply it another 2-3 times. I only needed the gel once. And then 9 hours later I had my waters broken, which was the first mention I heard of this step. I was not advised on how having my waters broken would impact my labour. The pain went from manageable to unbelievably unbearable torture within minutes.

Not really knowing my other options in pain relief I requested an epidural. No one spoke to me about any other pain relief options or that the implication of having an epidural would mean that I couldn't stand up, labour in standing and it would slow down my birth. The epidural was nice in the sense that it gave me time to rest, however I couldn't feel a thing and it made me feel quite uneasy at times in and out of consciousness, I mentioned this to the midwife who proceeded to reduce the amount down a little, within an hour I could feel a little more but I am adamant that the dose was still too high as it brought on the shakes with fever and a possible bladder infection.

When it came time to push I felt so unprepared, I was being told to put my legs up in the stirrups and push like I was doing a poo, it didn't feel right, I didn't know what to say or do because I didn't know my options, and because of this I felt like I couldn't say or do anything other than what they said. After an hour of pushing we met our baby girl. The moments that followed were happy holding our new baby, however soon after when she was taken away for her measurements and injection and I had to birth my placenta things didn't go to plan. It was stuck, and the Dr was pushing on my tummy and right up in there to get it out. I later felt ill and proceeded to be sick and feeling like I would faint at any moment. I was told I'd lost over 1L of blood and I'd probably need a transfusion in the days that followed, I'd also had a minor labial tear which he'd given me 2 cosmetic stitches for.

The care we received in the suite was memorable and amazing, the advice on how to care for my baby was exceptional I was so happy to be in capable hands gaining advice of some amazing midwives. However I will admit this was probably another opportunity to gain some insight on how to care for myself now that I had a baby and the consequences if I chose not to.

At my 6-week check-up I met with my OB who asked how my baby was doing and how I was adapting to motherhood discussing methods of contraception now that I can have penetrative sex again. I mentioned a strange nerve/stabbing pain on my left side of my pelvic area which he suggested I see my GP for a pap smear. He did not check to see how I was healing. I

look back at this moment and think what a waste of an appointment that was. If he'd of at least done an internal I may of learned about my prolapse sooner and begun my healing process earlier.

Around 3 months post-partum something seemed strange. I felt heaviness and a bulge inside of my vagina that wasn't there before. Realising this wasn't normal and googling like crazy I realised I must be suffering with pelvic organ prolapse. I went straight to a physio where she diagnosed me with both a cervix and bladder prolapse. In this moment my world came crashing down, so many thoughts and questions ran through my mind, will I be able to have another baby? Will I run again? Will I be able to chase my child? Can I jump on a trampoline again? Will I ever feel sexy or desirable again? Will my partner feel it when he has sex with me? Do I even want him to have sex with me again? Can I baby wear? Will I ever hike again? Lift anything heavier than 5kg? I felt so sick, sad, alone, ashamed of myself, of my body. I'd beat myself up because my body had let me down. I felt as if I couldn't tell anyone because they would judge me, they would judge my partner thinking his partner is broken. I joined a post-partum women with prolapse community group where I learned how common it was in vaginal deliveries and how it could have been prevented. It made me begin to question why, why is this the first time I am hearing about this, why is it not spoken about at any of the appointments I had, even with the physio I proactively went to see to prepare for my labour. Why they tell you to avoid constipation but not why to avoid it and what it can result in. Why when they tell you to rest after having a baby isn't it discussed why you should do so, what can happen if you don't give your body a chance to recovery. Why didn't anyone ask me if there was a family history of prolapse, my mother had a hysterectomy at the age of 37. I am now 37. Is this my future too? Why do they expect us to know all the answers when they are the trained professionals who can guide, teach, and provide us with all the tools and knowledge we should be entitled to? Why are we so reactive when we could be being more proactive?

Around the same time, I discovered my prolapse I was still occasionally spotting blood. When I met with my physio on that first appointment, she mentioned that it wasn't right suggesting I speak to my OB. He suggested an ultrasound where they found retained products of conception. It was a miracle I didn't have a serious infection. I urgently needed an operation to remove the placenta. The whole experience on top of my recent diagnosis of pelvic organ prolapse was traumatic to say the least. One year later I am still processing what happened in the months leading up to the birth of my baby girl and the months that followed. Could this all have been avoided if there had been more information provided for me? Would I be so ashamed and embarrassed of my diagnosis if I had been better educated on what it was and what had happened?

After one year since my diagnosis of pelvic organ prolapse, I have come more to terms with it due to support from others who have also suffered. I have seen 3 different physios and spent thousands on treatment, exercise rehab programs, pessaries, and Kegel weights. My diagnosis has impacted my daily life choices, on how I exercise, how I eat and how I engage with my partner. It is fair to say this has hugely impacted as well.

For the benefit of the future mothers out there (my daughter included) I would like to recommend that changes be made to increase the education behind preparation for labour, this should happen as young as when a girl has her first period. Giving the mothers of the future the chance to be proactive instead of reactive. I believe that all the specialist I saw during my pregnancy and the months that followed had an ample number of opportunities to educate me. I believe that every woman deserves to be informed of her options, of their pros and cons and how they might impact them and their baby in the future so she can make the best decision for herself when the time comes to deliver her baby. We need to talk more about the health of the mother and not just the health of the baby. It is the mother's future self she is protecting, and her way of life she might be impacting if she isn't prepared as she could and should be.

Thank you,

Stephanie Gatto