

**Submission
No 1162**

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

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My first birth in 2016 was beautiful and everything I wanted. My waters broke spontaneously after a swim at the beach. I was 40+3. I laboured at home for 6.5hrs with a posterior baby before arriving at hospital 10cm dilated. I spent 56 minutes in the birth pool and greeted our little boy in the water. My husband was strong and A, the midwife who had cared for us our entire pregnancy, was there, a quiet but formidable presence throughout. I was told how impressed the staff were at how quickly (and quietly) I had delivered. I trusted my body and it worked its magic, exactly as it was meant to. Our birth was perfect, entirely intervention free and I felt like I was made to have babies.

I went into my second pregnancy in 2017 feeling like I could climb mountains. "Your first birth was complication free and you were amazing staying at home that long... you'll sneeze this one out," everyone said. All I wanted this time was a water birth, for our second baby to enjoy the same peaceful transition earthside as his or her older brother. We were lucky enough to have A as our midwife again and I was excited to meet the little person I had nourished for so long.

But then A was diagnosed with cancer. My heart broke, not for me but for her and her beautiful family. At almost 34 weeks pregnant I acutely felt the loss of one of the most incredible women I knew. I could not, despite all suggestions otherwise, have this baby without her. But regardless we were assigned a new midwife. M was amazing. In one appointment she set me at ease, allayed my fears and echoed A's mantra that the people who are meant to be at a birth will be there. I was feeling confident again. My body was made for this and I could do it.

At 37 weeks I rang M to ask for advice about some itching I'd been having. I couldn't remember if I'd had it for over a week or just for a few days. I was chasing a toddler and working shift work so had little grasp of time anymore. "It's probably nothing to worry about," she said but I'd done some reading about itching in pregnancy and was trying not to catastrophise. We decided a blood test would be a good idea. The following afternoon at 2pm M rang. "I think you know what I'm going to say. Your LFTs are hugely deranged. We think you have intrahepatic cholestasis of pregnancy (ICP). I'm just as shocked as you." I let the words sink in. I tried to be brave but the fear was evident in the shaking of my voice. "Okay," I said, "what do we do now?"

After further reading, I discovered that ICP raises the risk of stillbirth dramatically and the treatment, especially if close to term is to induce labour. M said they wanted to induce me that night. It was too early I thought. I'm not ready to meet you yet little one. My husband had started a new job two hours away that morning and my mum was over 7 hours drive away. Who would mind our oldest child? How could I explain where mummy was going? We still had a few weeks to get organised. I had no bag packed and the car seat wasn't even in the car yet.

My mother-in-law left work and rushed to our house to mind our son and my husband missed his first staff meeting to come home. After a lovely bedtime full of cuddles and kisses for the soon to be big brother, I finally broke down, telling my husband this wasn't fair, mourning that our big boy would have to share me earlier than planned and fearful about what an induction would mean for me and our baby.

M met us at the hospital that evening and did an amazing job advocating for me. There were no birth suites available and there were already two women labouring on the ward so despite a junior reg standing in the door way and telling me, "if we don't induce tonight, my baby could

die”, the O&G team finally agreed that since it was already 8pm, breaking protocol and inducing me there and then was not the ideal scenario. There was one remaining induction spot two days later. Suddenly it was no longer so emergent. Disappointingly, M would not be working. My heart broke again. Nothing was going to plan. I felt out of control.

We returned to hospital the following day for a CTG and another blood test. M assessed my cervix to see if I would need the gel. It was 1-2cm and could be stretched to 3cm. Since it was so favourable, I didn't need the gel and I could go home. In hindsight I should have asked more questions but I had no idea what to expect so I had no idea what to ask. I was told my waters would be broken in the morning and that I would have one hour for labour to start on its own before I would need to have the syntocinon. M also introduced me to S who would be our midwife. She and another midwife had drawn straws between my birth and a first time mum who was also being induced. “Second time mums are always easier,” said S with a wink. I hoped we could live up to her expectations. We were sent home to sleep in our own bed but I didn't sleep much. My intervention free birth was falling apart. My body was failing me already.

The morning began with the resident missing my cannula. It was a bad sign. My waters were broken at 8am. I knew it was coming but I still felt violated. Our baby would not have known what was coming and I felt like their world had been invaded. In my head I drew a cross through the first request on our birth plan - no artificial rupture of membranes. I was then hooked up to the CTG/fetal monitor which meant my movement would be restricted. That was the second cross - intermittent monitoring only please. “It's okay, at least you'll still have a water birth” I reassured myself. Despite the beautiful instrumental soundtrack we'd chosen playing in the background, me trying to get into the right headspace and willing our sweet baby out, nothing happened. My body was not going to cooperate. At 9.30am S said, “I gave you an extra half an hour, but we need to start the drip now. You will turn it up every 30 minutes until we get some solid contractions. You will be in control of this process.” But I wasn't and nor was my body. I bounced on the ball, swayed and prayed for some consistent contractions but another two and a half hours ticked by with little progress. During this time I had to keep changing position because as soon as I got comfortable, the monitoring would cut out. It was maddening and thoroughly distracting. I couldn't get into the zone because I was constantly being touched and adjusted. At 12pm my uterus finally began to contract. Great, you've finally turned up to your own party I thought. Initially I felt like I could manage the pain, slowly getting atop the crest and waiting for each wave to crash. The first time around I had laboured at home for 6 and a half hours with a posterior baby for crying out loud, this one would be fine. I had enough time between contractions to catch my breath and ride into the next one. But S kept forcing me to turn up the syntocinon. A, who had promised she would be there as my support person if I wanted her, finally arrived and suggested I get into the bath. I was enveloped by the warm water and for the first time that day I felt comfortable and safe. I relaxed the tiniest bit and thought maybe I can have this baby after all. But as the syntocinon continued to increase and my contractions continued to build, I struggled to get a grip on each one. I felt like I was being hit by a freight train. The pain was intense and it didn't build, just arrived like an insurmountable wall in front of me. My adrenaline kicked in and made me super shaky. I felt sick. And worst of all, I needed to open my bowels. I was so utterly terrified of pooing in the bath that I stopped pushing almost completely. A knew that I wouldn't let myself go in the bath and suggested I try and sit on the toilet. I almost fainted getting there. Of course with everything else going on, I couldn't make myself go. This is not how it's supposed to be I remember thinking. How can my body betray me now, when I need it the most? Every time S told me to push, I felt the contraction slip away without a solid attempt at pushing. Mortified, I finally

managed the poo. Bits floated around me which spoiled the relaxing appeal of the bath completely. But at least I could push now. And I felt like I was. But S's words stung - "you're not pushing effectively." By this stage I was angry. I needed to get this baby out but apparently I didn't know how. Nothing was going to plan and now my bub was getting tired, their heart rate decelerating with every contraction. My husband told me later that he saw A and S exchange a look and he felt something in the room change. My husband who had felt so strong at our first birth was now afraid. "We're going to get you out of the bath." I distinctly remember almost shouting, "but I won't be able to push on the bed!" No one listened. I was helped out of the bath and onto all fours on the bed. By this stage I was bawling. Water birth was also marred by a big black cross. The pain had become confused and I began to completely lose the plot. I knew I needed to push harder than I ever had in my life and that now the mental struggle was almost as tough as the physical one. "Maybe I should use the gas," I suggested as that had worked wonders at first son's birth. But it was too late. I only had time for two half breaths of gas before I felt like I was ripping in two and I screamed in pain as our baby's head was born. The rest of the body followed with another push - "it's a boy!" I declared, peering between his legs exhausted and thoroughly beaten. But he was here and he was perfect and his face was exactly like that of his older brother only with a mop of dark hair. Maybe this time I can have the physiological third stage that I couldn't have with our oldest I mused, but that wasn't to be either. I had already lost 450mL of blood and S said she didn't want a PPH on her hands to top off this delivery so she gave me the injection and delivered my placenta seconds later.

I sobbed, apologetic that her "easy second birth" had taken so much effort. It had been 2 hrs and 15 minutes of active labour but I felt far worse than I had despite labouring for over 7 hrs the first time. I felt raw emotionally and physically. I was utterly spent. Nothing had gone to plan. My wishes had been ignored, no one explained the process of induction to me and at no point were my emotional needs met.

The next 24 hours passed in a haze. Our baby fed better than his brother had and so despite a brief jaundice scare, we went home 28 hours after he was born (one of the only things I did achieve as per our birth plan). It was only in the days and weeks that followed that I allowed myself to process our birth. How horrific I felt it was despite the reminders by a few of the midwives who saw us at home (including S) that 'at least we had a healthy baby'. One even suggested that I should blame our baby for the changes to our birth plan. I was devastated. I had a baby who I loved dearly but I felt no rush of love for like I had with his brother. I secretly resented him for the cholestasis, for coming early, and for our traumatic birth. I certainly didn't need someone else telling me it was okay to blame him. What kind of mother did that make me? My body had failed because I hadn't been able to have the birth I wanted, my mind had failed because I had completely lost the plot at the end of my labour and my heart was failing because I couldn't even bond with him. What could I do right? M came to see us for a home visit and knew how much I was struggling so she refused to discharge me from the Midwifery Group Practice program until she has satisfied that I would be okay. "Your feelings are valid and normal and you need to feel them," she told me over and over. It took one very wise and beautiful midwife who has since become a dear friend, to explain to me how the chemistry of inductions changes the way we bond with our babies. How our bodies don't make as much oxytocin if they're being flooded with artificial syntocinon. Suddenly it made sense why there had been no rush of love and why it took a good 6-8 weeks before I felt like our second son was mine and that he truly belonged with us forever.

Two weeks post-partum I spoke to a social worker to debrief further and she pointed out how brave and vocal I had been for both our sons at both of their births. She said contrary to my

belief that my body had failed, she wanted me to know that I had advocated for what was best for our second before I even knew him. I was amazing and I had brought him safely into the world even if it hadn't been in the way I had planned. It was exactly what I needed to hear to begin healing.

When we became pregnant with our third in 2019, we sought the support of a doula. Thanks to hours of debriefing and hard work, I learned to trust my body again. I knew that if I went on to develop ICP again and if I needed to be induced again, that it would be an entirely different birth. Our third son was born on level 4 of the hospital carpark. Our known midwife N arrived just in time, as did our doula, and I roared our 4.16kg son out on the concrete. I had the physiological third stage that I wanted and we enjoyed plenty of undisturbed skin to skin time. It was the most epic middle finger to the system and utterly healing for me in every way. I had done it, birthed our third boy entirely intervention free! We left hospital a few hours later, feeling more on top of the world than I ever had!

The icing on our family's cake arrived in 2022. Our fourth son, weighing a whopping 4.55kg, was roared out in under two hours in a planned homebirth. We did not have to attend a single appointment at the hospital, rather we were seen at home by one of two midwives on the team. Not having to organise childcare, worry about Covid or wonder if hospital restrictions would leave our doula out in the cold meant a huge weight was lifted from my shoulders. Wondering if we would make it as far as the hospital this time was a concern that was no longer relevant and we could focus on the birth and planning for our post-partum period instead. There was never a question of time limits, hospital policies or steaming rolling my wishes when I birthed this time around. One of our midwives arrived at our house just in time, as did our doula, and the second a few minutes after the arrival of our son. There was not enough time to fill the birthing pool but our birth was still epic and it means that each one of our boys has their own story.