

Submission
No 1170

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

Date Received: 14 August 2023

Partially
Confidential

14 August 2023

Committee Secretariat

Select Committee on Birth Trauma
NSW Parliament
Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000
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Re: Inquiry on Birth Trauma

Dear Chair,

I am a NSW resident and birthing person and I would like to make a submission to your inquiry on birth trauma.

Story of my Labour and Birth

30/04/23-05/05/23

Intended to birth at the Birth Centre
Birthed at _____, delivery ward
Antenatal care through Midwifery Group Practice (MGP) via the Birth Centre
Preparation as encouraged by MGP included a weekend Calm Birth course

Sunday

I went into early labour on the 30th of April. Contractions were about 20-40min apart and really easy - like period pain and just tension. I was up quite a bit in the night.

Monday

My partner (MP) and I were both in full calm birth mode, remembering all the things. Hydration, light snacks, breath breath breath work, by night time contractions were getting closer together. Pain had evolved and now included sharp pains starting at my glutes and radiating down both thighs.

Tuesday 1am

Contractions 3min apart, and had escalated there quite suddenly (over 2 hours or so). We thought this was it and things were picking up quickly. We were ready and drove to the birth centre. MP pulled over a few streets from home to call the midwife. Our MGP midwife (MW1) was off, so a new midwife (MW2) was planning to meet us but would be there after we arrived. We were told a third midwife from the delivery ward would greet us, open the birth centre and show us to a room. We arrive and go in. Soon the MW2 comes in. We introduce ourselves and show her my birth preferences. She says she wants to do a cervical check but it is my

preference to use other cues to tell progress. I tell her and she is sceptical, dismissing this, saying she has no idea how to tell where I'm 'up to' without checking my cervix. Mycgt preference to avoid cervical checks was to minimise my stress. But by now, my contractions have slowed down with the stress of this lack of support. I say I want to hop in the bath for pain relief, she says she advises against that because it will slow down labour and because I won't let her conduct a cervical check, she doesn't know if slowing down labour at this point is okay or not. This felt manipulative, as I knew the warm water would bring pain relief. She leaves and we run the bath, I get in. The contractions pick up again.

Some time later she comes into the bathroom, where I am in the bath, and says I don't actually have clearance from the diabetes clinic to be in the birth centre anyway. Apparently I was meant to get cleared at 37 weeks. We were never told that I needed such a clearance, even though we had been in contact with the diabetes clinic from very early on in the pregnancy. No midwife or staff at the diabetes clinic communicated that I would need a piece of paper in order to give birth at the birth centre. It would have been extremely easy to get, because I had been managing the diabetes through diet and exercise very well through the entire pregnancy. There is a lot of confusion. She goes to speak to the OB. My contractions slow again.

At this point I'm feeling tired and like the wind has been taken out of me. First the resistance to my birth preferences and my instinctive birthing behaviour, now failed hospital protocol that was interrupting me. I remember being in the warm water and telling my baby to ignore the faffing around, telling her it's not our problem, we are going to meet each other soon.

The next minute, MW2 comes back into the bathroom, this time with the OB. I am still in the bath completely naked, trying to meditate through contractions and stay connected to my baby. They start speaking about diabetes clearance and putting pressure on me to move to the delivery ward where I would be 'safer'. The gestational diabetes had been extremely well managed from diet and exercise from 18 weeks so I couldn't understand why being across the hall was safer than right where I was. I was already scared, being in labour and now I am angry they are pulling me from concentrating on my body and my baby, that they are speaking over the bath.. my sacred birth space. I tell them to get out and speak to MP about it all. Contractions continue to slow.

I'm alone, imagining MP with both MW2 and the OB outside, putting pressure on him.. I fight to zone back into peace during each contraction but I've lost the rhythm of my breath and the pain is becoming uncontrolled. I've been interrupted and contractions aren't picking up anymore. I don't know what I should do. I'm scared, confused and angry.. Plus now I'm worried because I haven't been taking my bloods over the last day of labour.

MP comes back in and I'm relieved to see him. He tries to explain what they said, which is that they can't guarantee my or our baby's safety because they don't know what my blood sugar is doing. Before he can finish though, the midwife comes in again. She repeats what has already been said. She asks if I've reconsidered the cervical check. At this point I just relent because it's obvious she's not going to give me any support without it, but I do request for the info to be

given to MP only as I know I will get stressed if I've been labouring for 2 days and am not dilated very far. I get out of the bath and the cervical check feels disgusting. The feeling leaves me very sad and reliving previous trauma. There is a lot of blood that comes out too, and it scares me to see it. MW2 says it's not a problem and leaves to talk to MP outside the room. It's so quiet as I clean myself up in between contractions.. I feel embarrassed, scared, sad, ashamed, angry, and confused.

MP comes back in and it's impossible for him to not tell me what the result is. My cervix is only 1cm, not effaced. MW2 comes in and I feel embarrassed to have come to the hospital not ready to give birth. She suggests we move to the delivery ward for pain relief and rest. I am stressed at this moment, so I refuse and we go home.

On reflection, this tense, cold, and unsupportive reception on the Tuesday morning contributed to the cumulative birth trauma I experienced. I am not sure I've captured the stress of those hours in the birth centre adequately, and my memory of the night has holes in it. I regret trusting the MGP and to provide adequate pregnancy care and the birth centre to be a safe place for me to birth. I regret believing that I could be respected for the birth I wanted based on my history and needs.

Wednesday

1am 1-2min contraction every 10min

The morning passes with a little bit of sleep (40min or so). Contractions must have slowed right down. I am taking my blood sugar to equip me with an argument to still be cleared by the diabetes clinic. MP has organised an appointment with my midwife and the head of diabetes clinic for 3:30pm today. I'm still hoping I will be birthing at the birth centre as planned. All sugars are well within range, but it is really hard to do as contractions escalate.

3pm

By the afternoon the contractions have picked up again. Every 2-3min for over an hour. We decide to go back to the birth centre and I am exhausted and in so much pain. This time when we walk into the birth centre reception and are met with resistance I just relent and get admitted into the delivery ward (where I was trying absolutely not to be). There is no meeting, there is no clearance given. MP can stay with me but is exhausted too. My sisters and mum go home. I take panadeine forte, lay down to rest...

5:30pm

My water breaks. I call the midwife (MW3) as I lay in the wet, not sure what to do. She comes in and tells me it sounds like my water broke and I need to wait where I am for the next midwife (MW4). I stay there in the wet and through contractions until the MW4 comes in. She says I can go to the bathroom to clean up and that I didn't actually need to wait for her before cleaning up. This makes me angry as I don't know why MW3 would want me to just wait in my wet clothes when I had just been comfortable for the first time in days.

MW1 is back and we move to a delivery room. I hop in the bath. I get out again. I try the gas and dissociate and panic. I am no longer connected to my voice, I sound like a stranger and it scares me. MW1 is not offering any support, and is hardly even in the room. My sister arrives and talks me through how to use the gas but I feel too loopy and distressed to continue. I get in the shower and the hot water helps. My sister leaves. MW1 leaves to go on her break. I am in the shower alone and it's really hot. I end up on the floor with all shower heads and the bath on. A different midwife (MW5) comes in and helps me, she gives me endone so I can rest. It helps but my contractions slow down again and I rest in bed. I'm meditating and psyching myself up (third time now) - I'm having the baby this morning, I tell myself. I organise the room and prepare to meet my baby in between contractions.

6:30/7am

MW1 is back from her break, comes in and by now I don't have any energy to assert my boundaries. She does cervical check and stretch and sweep (I've since learnt this is NOT best practice as it increases the chance of infection). I'm only 1.5cm, or a "stretchy 1cm" as she said. I don't know what this means but I'm deflated and the hopelessness is back. Next she comes in with the OB, the same OB as on Monday. They want to check the position of the baby due to the pain I'm having radiating down my thighs. The OB does an ultrasound and confirms LOP, but MW1 is speaking over her so it is really hard to understand what's being said. Eventually I work out that the OB is advising an induction. She also says that if I don't agree to an induction I have to either leave the hospital or move to the antenatal ward, and have 45min to decide because other people from upstairs need the delivery room for their own inductions. They leave and MW1 comes back in, and says actually you only have 15min to decide. This feels impossible. It feels like I may never have my baby and the pain will not end. I am now feeling extremely angry, hopeless and would have been delirious if it wasn't for the shocking pain electrocuting me every few minutes, forcing me back into my breath. I'm starting to feel more than scared, I feel rage and despair. I can't decide our next step in 15min.

I tell my baby that she is still safe, I'm on my way to meet her, I know that I just need some better support, some more encouragement and hope (after all - oxytocin is what progresses a labour!)..

So, I decide I need more than 15min to weigh up options, but can't imagine going home after 5 days of labouring. MP and I pack up our stuff in between contractions and we go upstairs. I decided to be induced the next morning and also that I am leaving the MGP program, I can not trust MW1 to take care of me anymore, especially not through an induction. I have yellow discharge and the midwives on the antenatal ward check it, saying it's normal. I spend the night in a shared room, and labour alone but in a shared room. I'm absolutely bone tired. I ask for pain relief but the doctor hasn't charted it. The midwife there (MW6) said she would follow up with the doctor. Several hours later I call again and have to wait for 40min for anyone to respond. I don't feel safe while I wait and labour alone, with my neighbour snoring loudly so I can neither rest nor concentrate through contractions. I know I am writhing in pain because I am not in my body anymore. I am dissociated and watching from above. When I finally see

someone (MW7) I ask for any pain relief, she sees the state I'm in and runs to get panadeine forte (endone hadn't been charted still).

Friday 7am

We move downstairs to the delivery ward again, getting ready for the induction. I am absolutely depleted but still breathing through each contraction. I somehow walk there. I get introduced to a new midwife (MW8) and student midwife (MW9). The head of MGP comes in and asks why I have left the program. I try to be as honest and quick as possible while breathing through contractions and can't believe I have to have this conversation now - can't it wait until I've had my baby?! I'm irate at the thoughtlessness and carelessness but there's no time for that.

I am given fluids and get hooked up to the CTG. My baby is showing a latent deceleration and escalating heart rate. An induction is risky now for the baby. A surgeon (SG1) and two or three other people (many people) come in and say the next step is to perform a lactate check. I agree to it because there was no other option provided and it is excruciating. I am in agony and tell them to hurry up. Contracting through this is harrowing. I am crying and I let out a yell. It hurts me so deeply. When they finish SG1 says 'well done, we don't normally do that on a 2cm without an epidural'. They leave. I'm naked under the sheet and lying in my blood and other fluids. I am in shock, I think I'm still crying but I can't remember. I'm still in this position when a random man (SG2) struts in with a coffee in his hand and says something like "I hear we are having a cesarean today" and I am astonished at what is happening. I tell everyone to get out. It turns out that was the head surgeon.

Again, I can't remember everything about this morning. Some parts are like a burn in my memory - the pain from the lactate check. The objectification of my body. Some parts are missing. I don't know why I wasn't better counseled on the lactate check before they did it. Why wasn't I told it would hurt more because I wasn't dilated far, or that the test isn't even a bullet proof measure for distress in babies? The agony and degree of trauma from this test is still unfolding.. I have lost all sexual desire and don't even like having my legs in certain positions anymore, just in day to day life. For example, I can get upset laying on the ground playing with my daughter, or sometimes during yoga in certain positions.

I go into the bathroom and take a pause with MP. I remember saying "that was fucked". I need help getting cleaned up so MP and MW8 help me navigate the IV etc. I get back on the bed and lay on my left side because my baby has a better heart rate in that position. I can't remember the following conversations or how I am told I need cesarean. We ask a lot of questions and MW8 and MW9 are really helpful.

I get wheeled into theatre. After prep, SG2 (the same one that strutted into the room before) says he needs to shave me and says "I always wanted to be a hair dresser". This comment makes me extremely self-conscious and embarrassed that my naked body was on the table, and I couldn't feel or see myself.

I was more scared and excited to meet my baby to care about that comment at the time. But it's a growing embarrassment in my memory and I think about it at least once day, when I'm getting dressed, in the bath with my baby etc. I'm ashamed of my body and what it looks like.

They take a while to do the surgery and I ask a couple times if everything's okay. My daughter comes out and we see her over the curtain. She gets taken to the table with MP. I get told twice that they are just checking her. She gets brought to me and put on my chest. I can't hold her. The tubes are catching on my hand and I only have one free hand. She's heavy on my chest and keeps rolling down to my neck. I am struggling and overwhelmed and so exhausted. I can't keep up with what has just happened to me. She is taken off me and I'm relieved and feel extremely guilty. She goes to the table again and I get moved onto a different bed and wheeled out. They say it'll be about 40min I think, before I can see my baby while I recover and I'm relieved that I can sleep. I go to sleep instantly when in the recovery room and wake up to my partner walking in with my baby. I'm ashamed that I felt disappointed to see them. All I wanted was sleep, I was aching for it. He puts her on my chest and she's trying to latch and I know it is good she is here trying to feed. We go to the room and she is given colostrum.

I am so sad that the first person to touch my baby was someone so arrogant and rude. Her first experience of human touch in this world was by two people (SG1 and SG2) who have hurt and disturbed me greatly. It turns out the surgery took a long time because there was an infection in my uterus. I'm left wondering if the infection was encouraged by the multiple cervical checks after my water broke, or the unnecessary stretch and sweep. The doctors at the hospital said the infection is what would have caused my baby the distress. If the yellow discharge the night before, would it have shown an infection?

All the stress from the unprofessional surgeons, objectification of my body, lack of care and counsel, meant that I was in too much stress to meet my daughter the way I wanted to.. she missed out on a warm arrival and I think I will forever be grieving that start for us.

When I think about having another cesarean, I cringe with self-consciousness. When I think about trying for a vaginal birth, I am fearful and doubtful.

It is still very early for me, and each time I read over this submission I remember something else that happened. I grieve for how things turned out and the start my daughter had to her life. I parent her with guilt and trauma lingering. I have to fight to stay present sometimes when I remember her birth. Even writing down everything that happened has felt incredibly stressful as I want to represent myself and family fairly. It's taken a week to write. I hope that when it is time for my daughter to have a child, should she want to, the system will be changed and actually be able to offer her support, respect, and maybe even honour her birthing experience.

Thank you for holding this inquiry and I hope it can expand to outside NSW too.