

**Submission
No 1010**

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

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Birth trauma – my story

BACKGROUND

I had a very calm pregnancy. I felt very at peace with what was happening. Yes, I had some issues (placenta previa and gestational diabetes) but they were manageable. The nurses and doctors guided me through the process. Because of placenta previa I knew that there was a high possibility of a caesarean. Because of gestational diabetes I had to closely manage my diet so that I didn't have an overweight baby addicted to sugar. That is what I thought/expected/was led to believe.

My husband and I attended a Calm Birth course. It was wonderful. I felt empowered and I actually felt very calm. It settled my nerves and gave me some information. In hindsight it was not the right course for us and I am not sure there is a course that really covers enough of what to expect or the 'other' possibilities...like if things go wrong. They encourage you to write a birth plan/birth intentions to ensure your choices are respected/adhered to but what about when things don't go to plan?

I had a caesarean scheduled a week after I started my maternity leave however I went into hospital early with a bleed. The bleed was scary but I still felt a sense of calm and inner peace. (It happened during the middle of the night and I was taken to hospital in an ambulance.) After a few nights in hospital I was dressed and ready, expecting that when the obstetrician did his rounds he would discharge me and I could enjoy a few more days of maternity leave before the baby arrived. However when the obstetrician got to my room he strongly suggested that I give birth to the baby that day.

THE BIRTH

We waited all day. I finally went into surgery at 6:30pmish. My daughter was born at 7:17pm. The obstetrician shouted out 'Hello Gorgeous!' and that was the most joyful thing I heard for a few days. I expected that my daughter would be given to me on my chest. Instead, after a few minutes (I think it was a few...time became warped) the nurse calmly told me that my daughter needed extra assistance. My husband then came over and let me know he was going with our daughter. I lay in the recovery area by myself. I said to one of the recovery nurses, "I've just had a baby but I have no baby. Where is she?" It felt incredibly lonely, completely surreal and nothing like I had expected. I had no idea where my baby was or what was happening to her. Birth trauma is distress experienced by a mother during or after childbirth. I experienced my trauma after birth.

AFTER BIRTH – THE TRAUMA

I read somewhere that trauma can shut down episodic memory and fragment the sequence of events. So what happened next is in bits in my mind. My husband has had to fill in my memory gaps from that time.

Here is what I do remember:

- After what seemed like hours, I finally got wheeled to the special care nursery where I saw my daughter for the first time. She was in a humidicrib, hooked up to all sorts of machines including the CPAP. I got to hold her small nimble hand through the humidicrib.

- I didn't know what was going on. I just had tears streaming down my face. My heart felt so heavy. I felt so very sad in a time when I should feel intense joy and love.
- Not being able to hold her for days.
- Not being able to see her face for days because she was hooked up to all the machines.
- They had to start her on donor milk. Not my milk. She couldn't breastfeed yet. She was being fed by a tube. I had to pump in my lonely hospital room.
- I felt so alone in my hospital room. When my husband left in the evenings, I cried and cried.
- I could hear babies in the other rooms with their mothers, with their visitors. Having the experience I was expecting to have.
- The cleaner looking at the empty crib in my room and wondering why it was empty.
- Here is an excerpt of something I started to write about that time:
 - She sat on the hospital bed. It was solitude but not as or where she expected. If she were to look at herself from the sky, she imagined a black 2d silhouette lying on the hospital bed in pain – a shadow of a person. Unusually, there was no movement. The only sound in the room – tears trickling down her face. The rain was hitting the windows. 'You've got a lovely view of the bush.', the wards man commented. She took no notice of the view and couldn't appreciate the beauty. Where was the beauty that should be laying in her arms? To her left-hand-side lay a tray of hospital food. She should eat, if she could gather up the strength or hunger to eat it. In front of her, the see-through, empty crib. In its place – an urgently packed hospital bag. The whole room lacked soul, it lacked identity. Her baby lay in another part of the hospital unable to breathe without the assistance of machines and cords and buzzers and special nurse staff.

PRESENT

This submission is not a fluid recount. I still find it painful to write about it. I am still processing the series of events. I still cry about it all the time. One year on I still find it very difficult to look at photos of my daughter at that time.

My daughter is thriving now and I am so lucky to have her in my life. However, I still have pain thinking about that time. I still get a heavy heart thinking about the fact that when my daughter was born she could not breathe, she was very sick and we spent very long days in the special care nursery hoping and praying for her recovery.

I felt compelled to write this submission because I feel strongly about parents having more support when birth trauma is experienced. I think about what can be done better. How can I reframe that time so I can eventually look back and not feel so sad?

REFLECTIONS

Questions for reflection and hopefully action:

- How can we better prepare parents for the birth of a baby? What information, courses and support can be provided in the lead up to the birth?
- How can parents be supported directly after the birth? (when mother has suffered potential birth trauma)
- How can parents be supported in the 'fourth trimester'? (when mother has suffered potential birth trauma)