

**Submission
No 1012**

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Mrs Sarah Scharfe

Date Received: 15 August 2023

Birth Trauma Experience

My name is Sarah Scharfe my birth experience was traumatic.

Birthing my son in 2008 I believe there were multiple factors and in sharing my experience it might inform practice and allow for trauma informed care. I would also like to see improvements in birth experiences for women and their loved ones in the future.

My pregnancy was not considered high risk however, upon reflection there were events prenatally that may have contributed to the adverse event and experiences of my birthing my son. I had a diagnostic USS at 4 weeks which showed a healthy heart beat and confirmed a pregnancy that was planned but unexpected. During that USS they discovered I had a bicornuate uterus. I was reassured that this would not impact on my pregnancy and was usually significant in investigating infertility, I was relieved.

I had moved along in my pregnancy fairly well with the usual symptoms of mild morning sickness and fatigue. At 11 weeks and 6 days, I woke and I remember thinking "one more day until the pregnancy is safe" and feeling excited to let friends and family know. Several hours later I started to hemorrhage with no preceding symptoms.

I presented to my local emergency department situated in a rural area. A small hospital that is partially funded through NSW health and private NGO funding. I had not yet met with midwives and was not connected into the prenatal pathway. I presented to the triage desk whereby I informed the nurse that I was in early pregnancy and was bleeding heavily. She reported, bluntly and insensitively, that I was likely "having a miscarriage" and to just take a seat. She could see I was alone with no support person. The impact of this sent me emotionally into a spin, devastated and emotional I sat alone. Shortly afterward I was ushered into the plaster room for privacy while no one reviewed me for hours, all the while bleeding heavily and alone. An USS was arranged and I was put in a wheelchair to head across to radiology.

In the USS they discovered that I was not miscarrying and there was a strong heart beat despite still bleeding and passing clots. The bleeding however later that day subsided without intervention and they sent me home. I was relieved and thankfully my husband had arrived to support me, it was an experience I would not want to wish on anyone. I had spent the entire day thinking I was miscarrying. I do not recall speaking to anyone or anyone reviewing me from maternity or obstetrics and no one informed me of any potential impacts to pregnancy or birth.

I decided to privately pay, out of pocket, to see an obstetrician for my prenatal care but still birth in my local hospital (the same one) as a public patient. I liked this option as I could regularly have USS's and felt secure with a specialist overseeing my care. The pregnancy progressed without issue and the information about my prenatal care was collected by the obstetrician in his private clinic, paper documentation and I carried on me a small book with documented observations.

My waters broke unexpectedly at 38 +6 out in public, very dramatic! It was a Saturday afternoon and there was no preceding pain or indication of labor, just a gushing of fluids. I got home and rang the hospital and they said I needed to come in as it was important to be checked and monitored. Before leaving, I went to the bathroom and found I was bleeding a small amount. I actually didn't know that this was not a normal thing. I was not concerned at this time.

It was a 20 minute drive to the hospital and by the time I had arrived my contractions had started and were progressing well, we arrived early evening on a Saturday night. I had intense lower back pain and went from the bath, to the shower and then to the bed to utilise the gas. I was determined to have a “natural birth”. I told the midwife this as she had never met me or looked after me pre-natally. Upon reflection this was a critical fact. The midwives had no records of my prenatal care, no record of my hemorrhage, just my card with a few observations on it.

I had my husband and my sister (a registered nurse) present throughout the birth. It progressed quite well and my memory of the ins and outs have faded. I do recall my midwife becoming increasingly concerned about the ongoing blood loss that had been present throughout the birth and decided to get the one doctor in the hospital to come and cannulate me, “just in case”. This moment insinuates that there was something alerting her to be cautious, she even stayed well beyond her shift ending at 10 until around 12pm. I remember the final push and my son being born at 0100hrs, it was a relief, it was over, however that was not the case.

My son was born on Sunday at 0100hrs with the cord around his neck and was taken straight away with my husband to an intensive area where they could resuscitate and monitor him. I was left to birth the after birth with my midwife and sister/support person. It is important to note here that in this rural hospital the midwives on duty, and one other doctor were present in the hospital, this doctor was in charge of the ED, the ICU/CCU and other wards. Importantly, there was an on-call obstetricians for emergencies.

The midwife tugged on the cord, I cannot recall if it was hard or not but recall it coming away entirely. I could not process what this meant or the implications to my health at that time nor realise this would turn into a medical emergency. I had retained my placenta and was actively bleeding. The clear and exact timeline of events are difficult for me to recall for several reasons; physiologically I had just birthed a baby, I was actively bleeding and psychologically I had to process horrendous events unfolding with minimum communication and involvement of either myself or my support person. I only remember snippets, all of which are highly traumatising, even to this day.

The midwife conducted an internal exam and manually tried to evacuate my placenta. I cannot even recall if she used an instrument or if it was just her hand. This was by far the most tortious and painful procedure I have ever had to endure. They supported my pain with the gas however this will be forever etched in my memory. It felt like she was pulling my internal organs out of my body and inflicted devastating injuries on my pelvic organs.

The midwife (s) attempted this procedure three times – failing. I remember during this time one of them sat me on a pan and I filled it with blood. I recall a moment of clarity thinking, “that is a lot of blood, that can not be good”. My sister who was a registered nurse, suggested around this point of escalating my care to the on-call obstetrician, which in fact she said several times as events continued to unfold.

The on -call obstetrician eventually arrived at 5:30, we were not certain at what time he was actually contacted. He looked at me and took charge instantly, he disconnected the bed himself and started pushing me to theatre. The nurse attempted to take vitals as he arrived for the first time since delivering, and she was unable to get a blood pressure. The doctor asked me to sign a consent stating he could take my uterus if need be, I signed.

I had an out of body experience being wheeled to theatre early that morning. I vividly hallucinated and can still recall seeing a friend who was never even there. I remember getting pushed across the bed onto the table and feeling like I was leaving my body, looking down and seeing events unfold. The next thing I knew I woke up in the hospital ICU, I had survived. I woke disorientated, confused and concerned about my baby, my husband and my uterus. Did they save it? I was swollen from head to foot. My heart rate was very fast and my blood pressure remained very low. I had been pumped with IV fluids and received five blood transfusions in total, which later, the obstetrician correlated to a greater than five litre blood loss.

At this stage I had not even really held my baby, he was 14 hours old when I got my first cuddles. I was thankful we both were alive but I did not feel human, I felt like I had been in a car accident. I got discharged after 5 days and I cried the entire way home. I was unwell, I felt completely out of control and had this newborn baby that was dependent on me. I was never diagnosed with depression but I believe I had it. I struggled to process the ordeal, I had no benchmark of what a normal birth was like. Friends and family would normalize my experience by telling their birth experiences and saying all births are traumatic. I felt I had no voice nor validation of what had unfolded.

No counselling was offered, no review was offered to me or my opinion/reflection of the experience. In retrospect I feel I should have progressed an official complaint and even litigation but at the time we did not have the money or mental power to do so.

Areas for development (admittedly these have likely already improved since my experience):

1. Co-ordination of care between private and public health care providers
As explained there was no co-ordination between my private provider and the hospital where it was planned I would birth
2. Current (in 2008) practice
A medical emergency should have been declared when it was discovered I was actively bleeding. Waiting 4 hours to contact the on-call doctor could have resulted in my death and very nearly did.
3. Acute psychological support when birth trauma is experienced
I wish that this was offered.
4. The role of "informed choice"
I had a procedure performed on me three times that should have been attended in theatre. There are physical and mental scars from these procedures. I should have had the right to go to theatre in a timely manner.
5. Information
At several critical points in my prenatal and postnatal care information was lacking.
6. Legal options
I was a young, naive woman who did not understand medical negligence. It would have been great to reach out to someone and discuss the matter.
7. Birth trauma should not be the norm