

Submission
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INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

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Partially
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Birth Trauma

I have had two different births and both were traumatic in their own way. I have put in bold where my second birth turns into a positive experience. This is all because of a shift change and the way I was treated by the person who came on.

First birth

I want to preface this by saying that I don't think any lay person could be more prepared for birth than me. I attended antenatal classes, calm birth workshops, hospital funded group physio sessions for pregnant people, and I listened to a lot of birth stories. My mum is actually a nurse/midwife. One of my biggest regrets is that I did not have her attend that birth. I thought it would be special just having my husband there. I don't know why I thought that.

My first baby was born at 40 + 6. The labour was approximately 30 hours. Tuesday around midnight I was feeling contractions. My husband and I were measuring them, and they were all over the place. Every 10 minutes and then every 2 minutes for a while etc. We called the maternity ward to check in with what they thought. They said come in and they would check me out. I went in and they strapped me up to a machine that measured my contractions and it quietened to an extent. They sent me home and I proceeded to continue to have contractions. I was feeling sick too so couldn't really eat. On Wednesday I went in around midday to check what was going on. I felt I was in a lot of pain, and the contractions were still all over the place. The same thing happened again, they gave me a tablet for pain (which I threw up) and sent me away. I was to come back when they were regular and at least 5 minutes apart. In the evening my husband called my mum to come over, I hadn't slept, couldn't eat and was in a lot of pain. My mum watched me during a contraction and told me that yes that did indeed look painful. I told her there was nothing I could do and by this stage I was getting quite upset. Mum said if I went in to hospital again they would admit me. I remember crying to her and saying that they wouldn't have me. She assured me that a third time and this long in pain would be an admittance. I went in around midnight that night. They put me on the machine again to measure contractions and during one particularly painful contraction they checked my dilation. No one warns you that that can be a painful experience. It was. The nurse braced her arms against the furniture and shoved her hand in as I cried out. Both my husband and me really remember this moment. I think I was 2cm, barely progressed. They talked to me about taking some morphine (or whatever the equivalent was). I was pretty adamant I didn't want it as I know it would go to the baby and they can then be quite sedate when born. They assured me that it would wear off after 4 hours and that there was no way I was going to have a baby in that time. I agreed. Apparently, the morphine would help my body relax so it could progress further. My hand was also cannulated for antibiotics because I had tested positive for Group Strep B. To me it's the cannula is something that stings the whole time. My mind can't seem to let it go.

My husband went home to get some sleep and I lay there on the gas for a few hours. I think it was about 5 that I called him back. Things were really progressing. I had now not slept since Monday night and barely eaten any food. The contractions were absolute hell, I was in agony, I was screaming, I was exhausted. I remember everyone telling me I just had to keep pushing. I told them I didn't want to, I had no urge to push and I really didn't want to. They told me I had to. 3 nurses and one doctor all coaching me that I just had to push. So I did, I kept pushing her until she came out. Now that I have had my second baby, I have realised that they had me push the baby out during the transition period before she should've come out. I had no urge to push. If you keep pushing and you don't give the perineum a break there is a high risk of tearing. I had a third degree tear. This type of tear has to be repaired in surgery. I remember telling my mum that there was something wrong with me as I felt no urge to push. I asked her later if she ever had any women like during delivery. She said she had, and she normally just gives them time as the body will start to push the baby out.

I was so thirsty after birth, but I was not allowed to drink anything. I was told I had to wait until the surgery. Surgery didn't occur for another 3 hours. I had previously decided not to have an epidural as it can increase your risk of tearing, you need to have a catheter put in and I was terrified of not being able to move my legs. Well, for this procedure I had to have a spinal block and required a catheter and could not move my legs and I had the third-degree tear. When I finally got back to my room I had to keep the cannula in as my blood pressure was very low due to severe dehydration and I also required antibiotics for tear.

Thursday night I hadn't slept since Monday night and for most of that night the other lady's baby in the room I was in was crying. I kept thinking it was my baby and would get up but it was hers. I was counting down the hours until my husband would return. Breastfeeding seemed to be going well. The tear however was incredibly painful, and I could not sit properly. I was literally breastfeeding standing up and I remember a nurse saying to me that I shouldn't do that and that I will just get tired. It hurt so much to sit. I was pretty upset about the birth too, I felt I had done a horrible job. I was so tired. I made them take the cannula out of me, it was stinging so badly, and I had one dose left so they thought it would be ok. I kept telling the nurses how much my tear was hurting. One nurse told me that it shouldn't still be hurting that badly and at the time it really got to me. Friday night I again couldn't sleep, and I decided that I just needed to go home at 2am (before becoming a parent I was a night owl, and these were normal hours for me). I was done being polite too. I called the nurse in and told them I was going home. They kept saying it was a bad idea. I said I couldn't sleep, and I really needed to. They said maybe I could go home and leave the baby here. That really had me panicked. At one point they told me that a doctor had to clear me anyway and she was asleep. I looked her square in the eye and said- wake her up. The doctor came in and assessed me. She said that keeping me here would be worse for my mental health and I was allowed to leave the hospital. It was nice having someone listen to me.

Second birth

During my second pregnancy I was required to see a specialist several times due to the fact that I tore badly in my first birth. From the get-go I was told by my specialist that he recommended an induction several weeks before my due date, an episiotomy and an epidural so it could be "controlled". I don't see how it would be controlled when I could potentially have no urge to push and would be entirely reliant on others for direction. I had heard that the second birth is a lot easier than the first. I didn't want more intervention, I wanted to see how I would go. I felt/feel incredibly traumatised by my hospital experience, and I wanted something better.

The specialist said to come back at 36 weeks after I have had an ultrasound and we can discuss it more when we know the size of the baby and the head.

I remember during the scan the ultrasound technician said to me- are you diabetic? I said no, but it does sound like that baby is going to be big. My baby was measuring big and her head was predicted at something like the 98th percentile. Both my husband and I have big heads, it's no surprise really. I sat down with the specialist, and he outlined to me why he recommended what he did. Babies head will get harder and less flexible as time goes on, which increases risk of tearing. We want it to be slower and more controlled at the end which was the reason for the epi. He also wanted an episiotomy too. If I tear badly again, I could end up with some permanent issues too and I was at an increased risk. I asked him to give me a percentage of risk. He said 5% increased risk. I told him I was going to stick with the 95% chance that things would be ok and was referred back to my regular pregnancy doctor.

At 39 weeks the doctor had a conversation with me about why having an induction was important. He offered to check my dilation. I remembered my previous experience of dilation check and how horrible it was and wasn't feeling that comfortable. Though I did agree to it with some encouragement. I was given a score based on how ready my body was for birth, I remember it being pretty much as far from unfavourable as you can get. We booked an induction in for 40 weeks and I thought I will see how I go. I tried all the tips to get labour going and nothing seemed to work. 40 weeks came round, and I cancelled the induction. My doctor happened to be at the hospital at the time and got me to book it in a few days later. I did turn up, but I was feeling pretty upset about it and they pushed it a bit longer.

The night before my second came. I showed up to the hospital. This was 40+8 now. I know that when the body is stressed out it is less likely to go into labour. I was worried about being induced and scared because of my previous experience. This is an example of how my first birth continues to affect me. I don't think spontaneous labour was in such a stressed state. They checked me for dilation again, still painful and still unfavourable. I was situated near the nurses station and the ward was very busy, they were trying to get more midwives on, and there were too many mums. It was also during covid restrictions. I could not have my midwife mother there. She is a nurse at the hospital, but rules were rules and I could choose her or my husband. I didn't want to deprive my husband of being there for the birth

so I chose my husband. I did explain to a nurse that I had a very traumatic birth the first time and that my mum already worked at the hospital daily but there was no way around it. I had the contraction machine on me that evening and they came in to do the cannular on my hand. I was told that it needed to be there for the drip the next morning. I asked to have it the next morning as I find it very painful and it's something that doesn't stop hurting. I was told this is the procedure. As soon as the doctor tried to put it in I felt a lot of pain and started quickly breathing. The machine was going off and my heart rate was too high. I'm not sure why I had such a reaction, I think it was the past trauma, the fact that it didn't really had to be in and I wasn't being listened to. The nurse commented under her breath "my god, if she can't even handle this". I was furious. I told her that I had given birth to my previous baby without drugs. Eventually they got it in. They also put the gel in me and said they would be back at 11pm to check me and give me more if needed. I waited until 11 and no one came, I pushed the nurse button and no one came. I turned it off and tried to get some sleep. My hand was stinging, and I felt like none of the staff were on my side. I spent most of the night miserable and crying on and off. I felt alone. At 6am I was taken to birth suite. I was told they would break my waters and give me the drip. I had researched and talked to people before hand and knew it was a possibility to get the waters breaking and keep moving around to potentially go into labour properly and avoid the drip.

Now, because I was so unfavourable I wasn't opened up properly down there. This made checking my progress (dilation) and trying to break my waters an extremely painful experience. There were many attempts and many checks and after all that at one point I was in the bathroom crying while my husband tried to comfort me from the other side.

After that I tried my best to walk around and get things going. I was having some contractions, but they kept saying it wasn't enough. Eventually somebody came in and convinced me to let them give me the drip. I said ok and just lay in bed defeated.

Here is where things started to get better. There was a shift change and I received a different nurse. I know this nurse. My mum knows this nurse. This is the nurse that delivered the calm birth workshop to me during my first pregnancy. I had been sending messages about everything to my mum the whole time who was probably beside herself with worry. The last message I sent to mum before I had my baby was _____ is here. She replied: Yay! Go and have that baby!

_____ came in, dimmed the lights, pulled a salt lamp out of nowhere and changed the entire vibe of the room. My husband had our playlist going too.

While I was on the gas having contractions I cried to _____ and told her how horrible it was going. I told her that I had been walking around and trying to get it going but nothing was working. I told her I hadn't slept all night and I told her they told me I should have an epidural and episiotomy and that I just wanted to see how I would go. I told her that they just kept telling me to push last time and I pushed her out too quickly and tore badly.

_____ listened to me the whole time. She asked me what I wanted to do. She also checked me for dilation, and it was the first time it did not hurt.

I found out later that _____ went out there and argued for more time for me. By the time she came back I had relaxed, and it had really started moving. I did not need the drip.

Birth was still a very painful experience for me. However, I did find out that for me the transition (the period of time right before your body starts to push the baby out)- was when I was directed to push out my first. Transition is often said to be one of the hardest parts, it is the part women are most likely to give up and beg for drugs. I went through the transition basically pleading for some sort of mercy and then I felt an entirely new feeling. My body was literally ejecting the baby out of me. This was the push urge that everyone told me about that I never felt. At 40+9 while the song Build me Up Buttercup was playing my second little girl was born. I did have a second degree tear, but this was ok. The difference between a second degree tear and a third is huge. I literally didn't notice the pain of my second degree tear at all. Whereas I was feeling the pain from the third for weeks.

_____, also knew that I hated being in hospital and filled out everything I needed to get out of there. I stayed for one night and then I was home.

I still suffer from the emotional and physical damage that occurred during my first birth. I also believe I suffered some damage during the breaking of my waters and repeated dilation checks at my second birth. I do think my experience shows the amount that can be achieved by one person listening and providing a safe and relaxing environment during labour. I hope that if anything can be learnt from the stories that are being received it is that listening and advocating for women when they are most vulnerable is key to tackling some of the issues that are occurring.