

Submission  
No 1020

## INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

**Name:** Name suppressed

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Partially  
Confidential

To whom it may concern,

My name is . I am a 35-year-old female living in Sydney. I gave birth to my, now 2-year-old son, at the hospital on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July 2021. My birthing experience was deeply traumatic, and as painful as it is to re-live the memories and details of what took place, I feel compelled to speak up and share my story in the hopes that this will contribute to a better understanding of the lived experience of birth trauma; and with the ultimate hope that this will result in much-needed changes to current maternity care practices.

### Pregnancy

I would like to start at the very beginning, and share some details about my pregnancy, as I feel this information is very relevant to understanding my birthing experience as a whole.

I have a chronic autoimmune health condition, which deemed my pregnancy high-risk, and put me in a heightened state of anxiety from the very start. Furthermore, the pregnancy itself was not a positive experience for me at all, as falling pregnant triggered a number of flare-ups of my physical symptoms and I was in an immense amount of pain for the duration of my pregnancy. To add to this, I was also diagnosed with gestational diabetes.

Having heard my fair share of traumatic birth stories (unfortunately these seem to be more common than positive birth stories), along with having very low tolerance to pain, I found myself overcome with fear regarding the birthing process and the pain that would be involved. My anxiety surrounding this consumed me, and I did everything in my power to equip and support myself to have a **positive physiological birthing experience**, including the following:

- Regular appointments with the perinatal mental health practitioner at hospital (she is one of the most caring and compassionate health professionals I have ever met; a true gem and an exemplary model for what good maternity care should be like)
- Educating myself as much as possible so as to overcome the fear of the unknown - attending numerous antenatal classes and asking several questions during my antenatal appointments
- Discussing my fear of birth and my low tolerance to pain with the health professionals during my antenatal appointments, and coming up with pain management options. **Please note that I am allergic to all strong pain killers, and my only options were gas, sterile water injections and epidural.**
- **Enlisting the services of a private doula**

Kindly note that of all the points mentioned above, being able to have a doula on my birthing team was the most crucial in helping me to feel supported and less fearful of giving birth.

I do not have any family in Australia, and my mother was unable to come and be with me for my first birth, due to Covid travel restrictions. **In light of my immense anxiety and fear towards birth, I knew that I wanted and needed another female with me in the birthing suite - someone who had experienced birth herself and that could help me specifically with emotional support.** The mental health practitioner advocated for me and put in a special request to the head of the birthing unit to allow for this amidst the strict hospital regulations during COVID. This was granted.

## Delivery

I started experiencing period-like cramps and extreme back pain early in the morning of the 13<sup>th</sup> of July. Shortly after, I lost my mucus plug. I called the hospital and they said that I could come in whenever I wanted, and that there was no rush since I was only in the very first stages of labour. I then called my doula to let her know what was happening. The plan was for her to come over and support me in labouring at home for as long as possible, before heading out to the hospital together.

My doula informed me that she had a cough, and that even though she was doing a COVID test every day and had had a negative result the day before (12/07/21), the head of the birthing unit had made it very clear that she would not be allowed to accompany me if she had so much as a sniffle. My doula and I had spoken about the possibility of her not being able to join me (for whatever reason), and the plan was always to arrange a back-up doula to be with me, which is what she then promised to try to do for me. Needless to say, I was devastated and started to feel panic and fear instantly. I couldn't imagine having to go through birth without her by my side.

My doula came over an hour later so as to at least be with me for that early stage. I laboured in the shower for as long as I could before the pain became absolutely unbearable. I barely made it through an hour before feeling that I could no longer cope and that I wanted to go to the hospital to get some pain relief.

Once I got to the hospital, I was taken straight into one of the birthing suites and offered gas. My pain at this point was even worse than what it was at home, and very soon after arriving I started howling for an epidural as the gas wasn't doing anything for me. The female anaesthetist on call at the time was busy with another patient, and I had to wait about 30 minutes. I was consumed by my pain and oblivious to anything and anyone around me. With each contraction, I felt that my body was being ripped apart from the inside. My body was tense, in a state of fear and panic, and I was utterly exhausted. There were many times where I felt I just couldn't continue.

In case it is of any relevance, when the anaesthetist finally arrived, she attempted to place the epidural in but it didn't work. She had to try a second time for it to work. A short while later, when the epidural finally kicked in, I honestly felt like a different human being. My body was able to relax instantly. I felt so much calmer and I was able to eat and drink for the very first time that day.

I started chatting with the midwife who was with me in the room at the time (who also happened to be team leader) and explained that I was very distressed when I first came in, as I didn't have my doula with me. She was aware of my disappointment and my need for that extra support. I also explained my issue with pain, and she assured me that once I was fully dilated and ready to push, I would feel no more pain than I was feeling in that exact instant (with the epidural having kicked in). My pain levels at the time were so minimal and very tolerable, and I felt so relieved knowing that I had this pain relief to help me through the delivery. I was honestly so overjoyed, I could have cried with happiness. For the first time that day, I actually felt like I could do this, and the fear began to dissolve away.

At some point an obstetrician came in to check how dilated I was. She informed me that I wasn't progressing as much as "she would have liked me to" and that I should consider an induction. I remember the midwife encouraging me, and saying wouldn't I like to get the baby out faster now that I was comfortable. At this point I was utterly exhausted and I remember thinking that all I wanted to do was sleep. I could my body shutting down with fatigue, so trying to get the baby out faster didn't seem like a bad idea. I discussed with my husband and agreed to go ahead with it.

At some point, the head of birthing unit also came in to check on me. She said she knew how devastated I must have been that I couldn't have my doula with me, but that she was happy I was doing well.

Side note: I found out 4 months later that my doula had called her earlier on in the day (shortly after I arrived to the hospital), having found another doula that could come in and support me, but that the head of the birthing unit refused to approve this. I was devastated.

In light of the trauma that I am about to describe, how different would my experience been had the head of the birthing unit allowed the replacement doula to be with me and support me, knowing fully well that I had immense fear surrounding birth and was in need of the emotional support.

My midwife kept checking to see how dilated I was, and when it was finally time to push, she woke my husband up so he could come and be my side. I was lying on my back at the time, and I remember asking if I could move to a more comfortable position. As she assisted me in turning to my side, I remember hearing her mumble "Oh shit". I looked at her and asked if everything was OK and she said that the epidural had come out. She then ran to the phone in the room and called the male anaesthesiologist that was on call at the time. I remember her saying "but this patient has an issue with pain", and I later found out (directly from her) that the anaesthesiologist was reluctant to come and speak with me/ help, but she kept insisting.

Once he came, he had a look at my back and said "sorry, the epidural has failed". During this time, I could feel the fear coming over me again. I couldn't imagine having to go through that pain again, especially having now had an induction (which I absolutely only agreed to in light of the epidural).

I asked how much time I had left and he assured me I should have at least 2 hours before the effects wore off, and the midwife seemed relieved and told me "We will definitely have the baby out before then". The anaesthesiologist then went on to assure me that in case I did need it, the midwife would offer me pain relief, and the midwife nodded and said "we would never ask a woman to push while in pain". Their answers seemed convincing and reassuring, and I said I was ready to start pushing.

The midwife asked me if I could stay on my back so she could have a better view of contractions and baby, and I agreed to this.

The anaesthesiologist shouldn't have made any promises, as within just 10 minutes the effects of the epidural began to fade and I began experiencing the most soul crushing pain I have ever felt. Due to the induction, not only was I drowning from the intensity of the contractions, but also by the relentless frequency with which they ripped through my body. I couldn't catch my breath. I wasn't able to rest for more than a second or two between contractions. With each wave, I remember howling and begging for help. "I beg you help me" over and over again.

I remember thinking and feeling that I was on the verge of death. That there was no way I could continue on. I had completely lost control of my body as the contractions took over.

Every now and then the midwife asked me to push and I would do my utter best.

I remember asking for the pain relief that she and the anaesthesiologist had promised me, and all she has to say was "You can't have any. Sorry". There was no kindness. No compassion. No empowerment. There was only suffering and pain and a feeling of utter terror.

I remember hearing my main midwife (team leader), and another one who had come in to assist, having a casual chit chat while standing at my end of the bed. They were talking about a baby from a previous delivery, and chuckling over something. All this, amidst me screaming and begging for help while my body twisted and contorted in agony.

I remember feeling hopeless, and helpless, and turning my attention to my husband while I gripped onto his hand for dear life. I remember begging him to help me, as I had lost all hope in the midwives helping me.

Twice during this time, the midwife barked at me and said "you only have 2 options. You either push or I put you in a taxi and send you home". How demeaning. How cruel.

Something that I often think about, is how very differently the above scenario could have played out had an anaesthesiologist not given me false hope and set me for failure, and had the midwife not been emotionally abusive. If instead they had said “ we are so sorry your epidural failed. We can’t give you another one, and unfortunately you can’t have any pain medication. We don’t know how long you have before the effects of the epidural wear off. We are here to support you and empower you through this. Here’s what you can try (moving to the bath/ shower/ changing positions/ getting my doula on the phone for emotional support etc.”

What if I had been given the chance to mentally hype and prepare myself for the pain, instead of being given false hope, followed by a cruel and demeaning treatment. How different would my birth experience have been?

One moment that is burnt so deeply into my brain is when I finally birthed my son. The midwife lifted him up and handed him to me, and I refused to take him. I didn’t want to hold my baby. I didn’t want anyone or anything to touch me or be near me at that point. They gave my baby to my husband instead.

I barely caught a glimpse of my son before closing my eyes and asking if it was over, and I was told that yes it was over. I remember feeling numb as tears came flooding down my face.

I remember feeling and thinking that my body had been violated. I felt dehumanised. I felt like I was an animal on the birthing bed. I felt worthless, unseen and unheard. I felt like my soul had been plucked from my body and sent to the depths of hell, never to be returned again. I felt broken and empty.

Barely two minutes later, I felt someone pushing on my lower abdomen. I opened my eyes to find the midwife pushing vigorously on my lower abdomen. I screamed and twisted in pain, begging her to stop. Within seconds I was surrounded by lots of other females, and another set of hands poking and prodding me. The pain I felt was crushing, and in some ways even more so than the birthing pain itself. I kept screaming and begging for them to stop, begging not to be touched, begging to be left alone. Eventually the midwife who delivered my son snapped at me and told me to stop it, and that what she was doing was important.

Nobody had bothered explaining to me what was happening at that point. I was in a state of utter terror and all I could think about was that I was being subjected to a second round of trauma, mere minutes after the first. It was only later that I was informed that I had had a haemorrhage and had lost a lot of blood, and that they were trying to stop the bleeding.

Despite all the information above, I still genuinely feel that I don’t have enough words to properly articulate my experience, nor the depths of trauma and terror that I was subjected to. I will leave you with this –

Once the bleeding was under control, I remember opening my eyes and with what very little energy I had left in me. I remember whimpering and sobbing as I looked up at the midwife who birthed my son and said “I’m sorry if I was difficult”.

It took me a long time to understand why I had apologised. I must have felt so abused in my body at that time, that subconsciously I felt the need to apologise to protect myself. This haunts me till this very day.

- 1- Why was I never made aware of the possibility of an epidural failing? If I had been made aware of this, I would have discussed a plan B with the health professionals in case this had happened. I would have been prepared and would have felt more in control.
- 2- Why wasn’t the epidural checked properly? I was informed that the epidural should have been checked every hour, however this was definitely not done?
- 3- Why wasn’t my file read properly beforehand, by both the midwife and anaesthesiologist? They should have known about my allergies to pain medication and should not have promised to provide them if necessary. This gave me false hope and set me up for failure.
- 4- On what basis did the anaesthesiologist decide I still had 2 hours left before the epidural wore off?

- 5- Why did the head of the birthing unit deny the replacement doula from coming to support me, and why did she keep this information to herself when she came to visit me?
- 6- How is it possible for someone who is in a position that requires the utmost care, and compassion and kindness, be so cruel? And how was she team leader? What kind of example was she setting to the other midwives in the room.
- 7- There needs to be a different process in regards to how to handle women who are anxious/ have a fear of birth etc.
- 8- There needs to be strict monitoring of a midwife's bedside manners, level of compassion and humanity when handling patients

### **Post Delivery**

After delivery I was taken to a private recovery room, where I stayed for one week with my husband and baby. While the care provided to me by most of the midwives post-delivery was excellent and compassionate, here are some of the things (in no particular order) that took place while I was there, which added to my overall negative experience and trauma:

1. I managed to express a significant amount of colostrum while I was pregnant. This was very painful for me, but I persevered as I had an ample supply and I knew how valuable it would be for my baby. I brought my entire supply with me to the hospital in a freezer bag, and my husband asked the midwives to store this appropriately when we first arrived. Post-birth, once we had been taken to the recovery room, I asked one of the midwives to get me some of the colostrum so I could give this to my baby. She came back with the entire supply. My husband and I asked her to return the majority of it back to the freezer so it wouldn't go bad, however she insisted it would be fine and that my baby would go through it quickly. She was wrong, and more than 75% of it ended up being thrown out the next day. I was so heartbroken.
2. Due to losing a significant amount of blood as a result of my postpartum haemorrhage, I was very weak and couldn't stand on my own or take a few steps without fainting. As a result, I found it impossible to take care of my son during this time - I couldn't even wrap him in a swaddle. I felt awful, and even further disconnected from my son. Once again, this was not the start to motherhood that I was had expected and looked forward to.
3. On the third day post-delivery, when my milk supply came in, this hit me very hard. I was shaking and shivering and in a state of terror and fear. I felt like the walls were closing in on me. I felt like I couldn't breathe and that I was losing control of myself. I felt unsafe. Even with my husband right there next to me, holding me and hugging me, I felt so scared and unsafe. I needed help but couldn't pinpoint what I needed. I felt like I was about to lose myself and have a hysterical attack. A doctor came to see me almost immediately, and I eventually had to be given an anti-psychotic to help me relax and go to sleep. Along with the birthing process itself, this remains one of the most terrifying experiences I have ever had.
4. The midwife who delivered my baby had been made aware that I wanted to put in a complaint, and came by to speak with me. Her timing was terrible, as my husband wasn't there with me (he had gone home to get some things), and I was having a lot of trouble breastfeeding my screaming baby when she came in and was highly stressed. I explained that this wasn't a good time, and her response was that if I don't speak with her now, I may not get the chance to speak with her again before leaving the hospital. In hindsight I wish so strongly that I had asked her to leave, as talking with her did more

damage than good; but being in the vulnerable and weakened state that I was in, all I could think about was missing out on my chance to have my voice heard.

All she had to say in response to the way she had behaved and the way she had spoken to me during the delivery was that she was “sorry” and that she was just trying to “lighten the situation” (in relation specifically to her comment of “you either push or I put you in a taxi and send you home”). This was inexcusable and unforgivable, and her demeanour and clear lack of empathy only made things worse for me.

Furthermore, when I questioned her in regards to her comment of “we would never ask a mother to push while in pain”, she responded with saying that she wasn’t aware I was allergic to all the pain medication options when she made that statement.

How could she have not read my file? How could she not have known about my allergies?

5. A couple of days before I was discharged, I let the midwives know that I wanted to speak with the anaesthesiologist that had come to check on my epidural. His boss came to speak with me instead, as that specific anaesthesiologist was not due back at the hospital till the following week. We had a long and very tense discussion, and while he was empathetic and apologised on behalf of the attending anaesthesiologist, some of his responses just didn’t sit well with me.

This is what he had to say in regards to the following points:

- His hesitation to come and see me: “He was the only one on call and had a lot of patients to get through” (Not acceptable. Why was he the only one on call?)
- Not knowing that I was allergic to pain medications: “He was the only one on call at the time and didn’t have time to read everyone’s file” (Not acceptable. Why was he the only one on call?)
- Giving me false hope by stating that I had another 2 hours before the pain kicked in (when in reality it was only 10 minutes): “Sorry, he shouldn’t have said that” (While I appreciate the apology, why did he say this in the first instance? What led him to believe I had 2 hours left?)

Furthermore, I would also like to take this opportunity to mention that during our stay in the hospital, my husband broke down, saying that he didn’t think I was going to make it, and that my face had turned so dark and black that he thought I was going to die. I was deeply distressed at my husband’s distress. My heart ached for him, as I could see that he was every bit as traumatised as I was by the birth.

Suggestion: In-house psychological and emotional support for the partners. This service should be available and accessible by the partner of the birth mother at any time when deemed necessary, while the birth mother and partner are staying at the hospital. An immediate resource to help them process the aftermath, until they are able to access more long-term support and services outside of the hospital.

## **At Home**

After spending a week in recovery, it was time to go home. Although I was desperate get back to a more comfortable and familiar place, I was overwhelmed and worried by how we would cope on our own. I still wasn’t in a good place psychologically, and I was still feeling very physically drained and unstable due to the postpartum haemorrhage, and I knew that the majority of responsibilities would fall to my husband.

Going home turned out to be even harder than I had anticipated. I had daily panic attacks for weeks, with images of my experience flooding back into my head every single evening. I felt trapped and suffocated and unable to care for and connect with my son. I was triggered by all the noises he made while he slept, and as difficult as this is to admit, I felt “afraid” of my son. I couldn’t sleep with him lying next to me in the same room. I was triggered by all the noises he made while he slept, and eventually my husband and I decided to move him to a different room, adjacent to ours. This was the only way my body was able to relax enough to allow me to sleep.

This was a very hard and heavy decision to make. It made me feel incompetent and unable to mother my baby, and made me feel even more disconnected from him than I had felt from the start. Once again, this was not the journey to motherhood I was expecting or had tirelessly prepared myself for, for how can one ever prepare themselves to feel “afraid” of their own child?

I eventually ended up seeing a psychiatrist. I was diagnosed with postpartum depression and anxiety, as well post-traumatic stress disorder, and was put on antidepressants to help me cope.

My start to motherhood was nowhere near what I had expected or prepared myself for. I had no confidence at being a parent. My husband took 7 weeks off work, and then worked from home till my son was 4 months old. It took me that long to feel somewhat confident with being left on my own to tend for our son, and even then, there were days where I would call my husband and beg him to come home, because I just couldn’t do it. Furthermore, I was not able to leave the house alone with my son until he was about 6 months old. I felt broken. I felt damaged. I felt as if something had been stolen from me that made me incapable of mothering. As someone who adores children and has wanted a child for so many years, this was a very harsh reality to come to terms with.

Needless to say, this all put a huge strain on my marriage, as my husband was working full-time and also parenting full-time most of the time during those early months.

Side note: My husband was and continues to be my biggest source of support and strength.

## **Today**

Two years on, and I am still deeply impacted by what has happened to me, both psychologically and physically.

I am still in therapy and still on antidepressants, and I continue to struggle with pelvic floor issues despite undergoing prolonged physiotherapy.

I feel angry, frustrated, disappointed and broken from the inside. I whole heartedly believe that all things aside, most of the trauma I experienced could have been outright prevented had the midwife who delivered my baby exercised humanity and compassion in the way she spoke and dealt with me. I am appalled, disgusted, and just utterly shocked at how cruel and abusive her behaviour was towards me, and I often find myself questioning why she behaved the way she did, and what I had done to deserve such horrid treatment. Nothing can justify the lack of kindness and respect she had for me.

Although my husband and I would love to grow our family, I am sadly unable to consider having more children at this time, as I am paralysed with fear at the thought of going through further trauma, and having my body violated once again. The thought that I may never have another child, or give my son a sibling, hurts deeply and simply isn’t fair.

Till this day I still struggle greatly with my confidence at being a mother, and have worked tirelessly to strengthen the connection and bond with my son who I adore so very deeply. The system failed me greatly, and as a result I feel like I failed my son so much in those early months, as I was very much in survival mode and unable to be a parent.



