

Submission
No 933

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

In August 2021 I gave birth at _____ Hospital, _____.

What I believe should have been an uncomplicated birth and empowering rite of passage for me and my husband was instead an unnecessarily and highly traumatic event.

I missed out on a spot in the Group Midwifery Program because the system for registering your interest is to leave a voicemail message in which you are instructed not to call back to check whether you have been accepted or not. Due to an administrative error, my message was never received and as instructed, I didn't ring back to check. At _____, this was the only way to access continuity of care, which we know is a massive factor in positive birth outcomes. It is ridiculous that this level of care is available to only very few women and that it relies on a very fallible voicemail system.

My care was instead led by the birth centre. I attended all of my checkups at the birth centre instead of the GP as I thought there would be a chance I might know the midwife during my labour. While the midwives were kind and caring there was evidently serious understaffing and there were gaps in my care, eg I was never told about colostrum expressing. I later understood that the understaffing was so problematic that the birth centre did not operate at night - which is biologically when the majority of women go into labour.

My waters broke a bit less than a day before my labour properly kicked off. When I went into hospital to be assessed I was told that as there was now a risk of infection I could no longer be in the birth centre and an induction would be booked for me 'just in case' my prelabour did not progress. This instantly added pressure and stress that is counter to a productive and positive birthing experience.

That afternoon I went into active labour and managed this at home for a while. The delivery ward midwives gave very little guidance about when to come to hospital. Once we arrived at the hospital I was put into a small assessment room and the midwife asked to conduct a vaginal examination. I declined this examination as the evidence shows these are not reliable measures of the 'progress' of labour, they are extremely uncomfortable and pose a risk of

infection. The midwife looked stunned and said she could not admit me into the delivery ward unless she did a vaginal examination. Eventually I 'consented' in order to receive medical care for the birth of my baby. I was later subjected to countless more vaginal examinations that I did not wish to have, by countless medical staff. I can only imagine how this must have increased my risk of infection which was apparently such a concern of those same medical staff.

I was then left in a small, bright and clinical room for over an hour with a short cord attaching a monitor on my belly to a computer. I still don't know why this happened. It was not an appropriate environment for a woman in labour.

Once I was in the delivery room I was told I could not use a bath for pain management due to risk of infection. I was offered the shower instead which did help except the midwife was constantly coming over to fiddle with my monitors and eventually requested a headclip monitor for the baby. This just added to my discomfort and was yet another unnecessary intervention that I did not wish to have.

The midwives provided zero advice or support about how to progress labour through active birthing techniques and instead just stayed at their computer 'monitoring' my labour.

Periodically the doctors would invade the room, conduct examinations and tell me the labour wasn't progressing quickly enough. My fear actually caused my contractions to completely stop when the doctors entered the room, one doctor even made a comment about it. Safety and trust is essential in the progress of labour and that had been lost when I was told I could no longer be in the birth centre and a time limit was put on my labour.

The doctors began to threaten me with an emergency c-section if my labour didn't progress quickly enough and showed disdain at my efforts to negotiate more time for my baby to be born. Eventually they decided they needed to augment my labour with syntocinon. Exhausted and scared I asked about an epidural. I was told that I couldn't wait and see what the effect of the syntocinon would be as the anaesthetist was only available immediately or in 3 hours time.

Despite still having movement and feeling in my legs after the epidural I was then told to labour on my back which is anatomically the worst position for birthing a baby. My husband managed to convince them to allow me to labour lying on my side instead. Finally I got an amazing midwife and student midwife who helped me to push my baby much further down, in spite of the threats being made by the doctor who wanted to pursue a forceps delivery. Over 1.5 hours I was able to progress enough that I received a vacuum assisted delivery instead. I now think it is likely that my baby's distress was caused or worsened by the forced pushing.

I remember a rush of people in the room during and immediately after the birth of my baby, who was thankfully totally healthy and fine. Then everyone left. I was alone with my baby on my chest, trying to work out how to feed her. No one told me there was a buzzer to press and get help. Eventually someone wandered into the room and helped me to get her to feed. She was so exhausted from the distressing birth that this was quite difficult. I was alone again, exhausted and trying desperately not to fall asleep, terrified that I would drop my baby.

The postnatal ward was depressing, with kind midwives but disgusting food and no natural light. Thankfully I was able to go home quickly and received home visits in the following days (cut short by covid lockdown). One midwife helped us to make some sense of what had happened in the birth by going through the file notes in detail.

Birth trauma has impacted me deeply. I still feel extremely distressed about what happened and the powerlessness I experienced because of our harmful hospital system. My husband and I want to have another baby, however this experience has caused us to delay and dread what might happen the next time. I work in the health system and it has impacted on my engagement in my job. I know that what happened to me was not unusual or extreme and I can't fathom the number of women and partners who must feel similarly to me.

The system needs to be turned upside down. We must provide continuity of care for all women, truly safe birth spaces, high quality birth education and skilled non-medical birthing assistance. Birthing women nurture our future generations. We need to provide practical and ongoing support to every birthing woman that respects her wishes and treats her like a worthy human being.