

Submission  
No 938

## INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

**Name:** Name suppressed

**Date Received:** 9 August 2023

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Partially  
Confidential

My experience of birth trauma had extremely damaging and ongoing effects on my mental and physical health for 5 years postpartum.

I believe my experience addresses the following terms of reference:

1. (a) the experience and prevalence of birth trauma (including, but not limited to, as a result of inappropriate, disrespectful or abusive treatment before, during and after birth, also referred to as "obstetric violence")
2. (b) causes and factors contributing to birth trauma including:
  1. (i) evaluation of current practices in obstetric care
  2. (ii) use of instruments and devices for assisted birth e.g., forceps and ventouse
  3. (iii) the availability of, and systemic barriers to, trauma-informed care being provided  
  
during pregnancy, during birth and following birth
3. (c) the physical, emotional, psychological, and economic impacts of birth trauma, including both short and long term impacts on patients and their families and health workers
4. (d) exacerbating factors in delivering and accessing maternity care that impact on birth trauma generally, but also in particular:
  1. (i) people in regional, rural and remote New South Wales
  2. (v) young parents
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6. (f) barriers to the provision of "continuity of care" in maternity care
7. (g) the information available to patients regarding maternity care options prior to and during their care
8. (h) whether current legal and regulatory settings are sufficient to protect women from experiencing birth trauma
9. (i) any legislative, policy or other reforms likely to prevent birth trauma, and
10. (j) any other related matter.

I was 25 years old when I gave birth to my son in 2017 at \_\_\_\_\_ Hospital in \_\_\_\_\_.

I believe that much of the birth trauma that I experienced could have been prevented. There were many instances of neglect. Below I will detail the series of events I feel are important to communicate so you can gain an understanding of our case.

On November 15, 2017 I laboured at home for 12 hours before heading into the maternity ward at \_\_\_\_\_. When we got up to the ward we were met and looked after by a midwife who had only been working there for 3 days. She was kind but clearly had no idea about the procedures or where anything was. I had arrived in the throes of labour and it being my first child I was a bit concerned that we were in the care of somebody who was not confident in their position. I

cannot understand how you can put a midwife on the ward with someone in labour who has had little to no tools or training at that hospital to help the patient. I asked the other midwife at the desk if there was any chance we could have a different midwife who wasn't so new and we were told they were too busy and had to stick with her. That was fine, we understood and I continued to labour until late that evening with my partner's support. When the shift changed and we had a new midwife. I continued to labour well with her support and I remember her coming regularly to check the baby's heartbeat with the doppler. After midnight I was in the bath and felt like I wanted to push. I spent over two and a half hours pushing with all my strength, mentally and physically but could feel at this point that my baby wasn't moving anywhere. A new midwife (midwife B) (a locum midwife) was also in the room at this point. Midwife A asked her to check the baby's position and Midwife B said it was fine and commented "The baby can get out. It's as if she's just not focusing" I remember hearing continue to say negative comments like this about my lack of focus and that I couldn't do it. I was so focused on trying to push my baby out that I didn't let this bother me at the time and it wasn't until weeks later that I realised how shocking her commentary was. After so much pushing I was told they would call the obstetrician to come in, at which point I was relieved as I didn't understand why I couldn't get my baby out when I was trying so hard and the midwives weren't telling me much else besides telling me to push. I remember feeling alone and even though the midwives were there I felt like I had no help. From here, the obstetrician arrived and took control, he told me to get on my back, my feet were put in straps, and he told me to push without making a sound. I screamed in pain at one point and he yelled at me to be quiet. After an episiotomy (with no pain relief) my son was born with the forceps and it was discovered that he was in a lot of distress which hadn't been picked up by the midwives. I was told it was a case of mild dystocia and he had been stuck in the birth canal. He was born not breathing and received a low AGPAR score and had to be intubated a number of times. One of his lungs collapsed from the intubation. (He recovered) He was then flown to by NETS in a helicopter and we followed, myself in an ambulance, and my partner had to do the 3-hour drive. It was half a day before I could hold my baby. We stayed for a few days in Hospital while my baby was in the NICU and then we were told we were to be transferred back.

When we returned to after a days in Hospital, we endured further trauma.

My baby and I were transported from Hospital by the patient transfer service. I was in a very poor way and after days could still not sit upright and barely walk. When we arrived back we saw Midwife B on duty. I left our room to fill up my water bottle and as I was passing the desk I overheard Midwife B complaining to other midwives about the fact that we had come back to . This really upset me, we obviously didn't want to be there, and she acted as if it was a nuisance. At this point I was feeling really badly about Midwife B's behaviour. Someone must have told Midwife B to apologise to us, she came in the room and gave us a really patronising apology which really only made us feel worse. Midwife B had been allocated to look after us but after everything that had happened during the birth, we were really uncomfortable with that. I asked the ward manager if we could have another midwife look after us and I said "Please I don't want her looking after us as she made me feel really bad at my birth" But she abruptly told us again they were busy and Midwife B was to be the one looking after us. She

was on for the next few days in shifts, so we had her multiple times. We were mostly left to our own devices which was fine as we were confident enough with our baby. Despite our condition and experience we still felt positive towards the other midwives and didn't want to bother them unnecessarily as we knew they were busy. Even so, our experiences continued to be bad with Midwife B and the hospital. When it wasn't her shift I had another midwife who was empathetic. We asked again if we could have someone else and she tried when her shift was ending to get a different midwife to look after us but again we were told they were too busy and had to have Midwife B. She frequently forgot my painkillers when they were due. A blood test was ordered for me and Midwife B had a hard time getting a vein, in her attempts to withdraw blood I had bruising on my arm that lasted for weeks. An iron transfusion was also ordered for me and was supposed to be given to me at 7am on our last morning there. The hospital was 'busy' and so no one came. Midwife B ended up trying to do it in the afternoon, and did three failed and painful attempts at inserting the cannula until she finally got it. These experiences continued to cause me unnecessary pain and grief in the already difficult days. I have never felt so much despair in my life as I did then, after everything, with a catheter still in days after the birth (due to vague bladder damage that was never resolved) and Midwife B who was so awful to us unsuccessfully jabbing needles into my tender arm.

Then there is the experience with my catheter which is also long and painful. After the birth I couldn't void my bladder so a catheter was put in place, at first it was unsuccessfully attempted by a nurse on the unit, causing me more pain. Apparently it was difficult as I was extremely swollen from the extended pushing. The next few days I had a series of trial of voids which were unsuccessful and so the catheter was repeatedly taken out and put back in. I was told I had somehow sustained bladder damage. After one week I still couldn't void. Then after another two weeks. Still no success. I wasn't given much indication as to why it wasn't working. I'm not sure if a urine sample was done, I certainly wasn't told of any results. We'd go home (with my catheter bag) and had to continue to return to the hospital for tests. I hated going back there. After 3 weeks postpartum the maternity unit decided I should see the continence nurse, who would teach me to self-catheterise if by the following week (4 weeks postpartum) I still couldn't void. I was looking after my newborn with a catheter bag strapped to my leg and had no idea why my bladder was damaged. When we arrived at the appointment with the Continence nurse she talked quickly of how busy she was and how everyone was trying to finish up for the year. I asked her what the plan for me that afternoon was and she said she would remove the catheter and send me home and we would see the follow morning if I would need to self-catheterise she would teach me then. She told me I might have to self-catheterise for the rest of my life. She told me if I went home and found I couldn't void that night just to come into the Emergency Department and she would put notes in my file to put the catheter back in if that was the case.

She didn't do a trial of void for me and the appointment was shorter than 10 minutes and she was out the door. I remember that she didn't even take her handbag off. We went home feeling uncertain but hopeful, the first time in four weeks after having my son that I hadn't had a catheter with a 2L bag strapped to my leg and so we were happy. That quickly faded as by 9pm that evening I couldn't empty my bladder and was in a great deal of pain. I tried everything at home in order to void and in tears, we packed our newborn into the car and headed into the

Emergency Department about 10pm. I was in so much pain and unable to void. We arrived to ED and the young triage nurse was rude and impatient. I told her that I needed a catheter put back in straight away or I could have permanent damage and that the continence nurse had told me there would be a note on my file and that if we waited and my bladder would become distended. She told me I would just have to wait to see the doctor first to assess me and that he would be awhile and that she wouldn't put a catheter in for me. I paced around the waiting room in excruciating pain as my bladder continued to fill. After sometime my partner suggested we head straight to the maternity unit as they know us by now, so we did, and a ward escorted us upstairs where one of the midwives eventually put a catheter back in. She withdrew 1l of urine from my bladder (a lot). This experience was so distressing. It was midnight when we finally got the catheter back in, and we were dealing with all of this with our newborn baby with us.

The next morning I had a follow-up with the obstetrician to try to understand what had happened. They were appalled to discover that my catheter was taken out by that nurse and that I was sent home without a trial of void, which apparently goes against procedure.

At this point, a family friend had heard about what was happening to me and felt it wasn't right and that I should seek a second opinion. I travelled to see a specialist in Sydney (5hrs away). The specialist in Sydney was fantastic and expressed a lot of concern about what had happened to me with my treatment at . As soon as I arrived they tested my urine and put me on a course of antibiotics, with some other suggestions. Two days later when I returned for a follow up I voided successfully because of their simple prescription of antibiotics (it turned out I had a bladder infection contracted in the hospital, which was no surprise given I had been wearing a catheter for so long). We still don't understand why this wasn't discovered at the hospital.

There were other small things that happened to us but these are the main factors that contributed to our traumatic experience. The common denominator was that things were 'busy' and so we were constantly passed off to other nurses and between hospitals with little communication which in turn caused us more grief and pain. I feel that the first 5 weeks of life with my baby whilst wearing a catheter bag were made so much harder by factors that could have been prevented and incompetent staff with a lack of communication between departments.

When we would need to return to the hospital following the birth I would experience terrible panic attacks in the car park. I have no history of anxiety but our experiences after my son was born left me and my partner feeling incredibly anxious about the hospital, complete distrust in the health system and even anxiety about appointments for us with my GP. A year later we ended up leaving as I had such severe postpartum depression and anxiety from the birth and was having dark and intrusive thoughts about the experience and couldn't bear to be anywhere near the area anymore.

During this time, my partner had to take 8 weeks off work (unpaid) to take care of me as I was taking care of my baby and breastfeeding but could not sit upright or walk for weeks due to pelvic floor trauma and the catheterisation of my bladder.

There were also other instances of medical neglect during this journey that caused me pain and trauma.

The obstetrician warned me and my partner that given this experience, I would be a sitting duck for post-natal depression. I ignored his warnings at the time, as I was just so desperate to get away from the hospital and get home to enjoy time with my baby. 6 months later I was in a terrible state and called the Panda Hotline. I was experiencing regular triggers, having flashbacks and nightmares and an onslaught of physical symptoms. I was diagnosed with PTSD and severe postnatal anxiety and depression in the year that followed. I incurred ongoing medical costs to deal with this. Both my partner and I were deeply traumatised. I don't think I will ever "heal" from this experience, but I have accepted it. I would have liked to have another child, but I'm not sure I can. So much of my trauma was caused by things that felt preventable.

I am willing to be a witness.