

Submission
No 939

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

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Partially
Confidential

November 2017 – Incompetent Cervix – Premature Birth at 22 weeks 6 days.

We had just had our 20 week ultrasound with a sonographer who felt as though we were inconveniencing him. We received no photos of our baby and this is something we will remember for the rest of our lives, because this was the last time we got to actually see our daughter before things went wrong.

Our next midwife appointment was a week or so later, just a check in to run through how we were feeling. Everything looked great, the ultrasound report read well and I was feeling good.

The next day we had a gender reveal, a first niece for our siblings and first grandchild for our parents. I had woken up feeling a little off – foggy, sore back and some very light spotting. I was told this was normal.

The next day we were travelling to [redacted] from [redacted] for a baby expo. We got to [redacted] and we called the on call midwife, because I was still spotting. She checked our information and said not to worry, that spotting is normal and that the ultrasound from a few weeks ago read to be fine. She said we could call through to maternity on our return if we were worried. Had she just told us to come home to be safe we would have. The spotting continued throughout the day and we finally arrived home from the expo and to the [redacted] hospital at 4pm.

When I first presented to the maternity ward, the midwives looked at me like I shouldn't be there. They kept asking why I was here and made me feel like I was the biggest inconvenience. They begrudgingly took me in to an assessment room, hooked me up to the trace and took my basic vitals.

We were told that was all they could do for the moment because the doctor was not available, but they would be by when available. We waited in the assessment room with sporadic check ins, each time a different midwife, constantly questioning who we were and what we were doing there. At the four hour mark, we were told midwives could not perform cervical checks and as the doctor was the only one on shift and was in an emergency surgery, that we could either wait or we could go home and come back if anything changed. I felt like we were being shoved out the door because we were first time parents.

I went to the bathroom before we left and there was a lot more blood this time. I called out to my husband and said we aren't going anywhere, something isn't right. Had we gone home when they told us to, we would have birthed our daughter at home, alone.

I went back to the room, crying and panicking. This time they were starting to take me seriously. The doctor finally visited, did a cervical check and asked if I was feeling anything. I mentioned since coming back from the toilet that I was feeling tightening in my stomach, no pain, just muscle tightness. She hooked me up to the trace again and stepped outside to call an OB. She said I was 2cm dilated and that the doctor had said that it is too late to place a cerclage. She said that if baby was born tonight, baby would not survive.

They gave me medication, moved me into different positions, and then transferred me to the labour ward. I had no idea what was going on, I had no idea about what to expect or what options we had. I didn't know I had to go through the birth, or birth the placenta. I didn't know whether she would be born alive or dead. I didn't know what our baby would look like. None of this was explained.

I got up in the middle of the night to go to the toilet, I had now been here for 8 hours. When I went to the bathroom my waters broke. I had no idea what was happening to my body. We had no time

to plan for this or read ahead in the books, or to prepare ourselves for the birth. Our baby was only 22 weeks and 6 days. She wasn't supposed to be born yet.

After another 5 or so hours, our daughter arrived breech. She was absolutely perfect in every way. We didn't realise when she was placed on my chest that she was still alive and breathing. We only had her with us for 28 minutes and I wish we had fit more into that time. During this time, I was given medication to stop the blood and deliver the placenta, but this wasn't fully effective. Only minutes after our daughter taking her last breath, I was whisked away to theatre to have a D&C for retained placenta. I left my dead daughter and my husband alone in the labour ward and missed out on all of my family having their first hold of my little girl.

Once out of recovery we got to make memories with our daughter, have her in a cuddle cot and read to her, show her to our family. I was the proudest Mum. But I was also so weak from having lost so much blood that I couldn't physically stand to give her a bath. I didn't know what we were allowed to do with her. Even through my weakness, they took more blood. They gave me a medication to take to stop my milk coming in and it did absolutely nothing, but I also had no information about what to expect or how painful this would be.

When the social worker came to visit, she basically ticked off her checklist giving us the phone numbers for the funeral home and the information for maternity leave payments. Then she left and we never heard from her again. We didn't even know we didn't HAVE to have a funeral.

Most of the experiences from here on were nice, our midwife was exceptional and made the world of difference, but there has always been something nagging in the back of my head saying I wish I had spoken about this experience to the hospital. That it wasn't right.

We were not given any information aside from the Bears of Hope bag, about what to do next or what to expect. We only received a house visit because our midwife took time on her lunchbreak to come and see us. There was no follow up from the hospital, no forms for us to keep, no explanations.

I was sent to the antenatal clinic for my 6 week check in, sat beside 6 other pregnant women, one of whom was talking about how she would have to give her child up to DOCS because she couldn't care for it. I sat here for an hour waiting to see a doctor. I didn't even get to see the doctor I knew, I had a registrar who didn't know a thing about me. I was referred to a blood specialist who thought I must already be over it, giving me a tap on the shoulder to say we could try again and leaving me with his understudy to finish the appointment.

We were told eventually by our GP that the cause of our loss was that I had an incompetent cervix. Naturally I blamed myself because it was my body that let me and my daughter down.

The system failed us in so many ways. I can't even begin to say how many times I felt let down on this journey, especially looking back.

We went on to have two more children, both pregnancies filled with anxiety and fear, both filled with medications, surgeries, telling our story to people over and over again, paying out of pocket for an OB because that's what we thought was our only choice.

2018 – 38 Week Birth, Artificial Rupture of Membranes, 2.5 hour delivery

I had a cerclage placed at 13 weeks and I cried so hard while they were prepping me for surgery that the OB yelled at staff to stop talking when we got into theatre and give me some respect. One nurse

handed me a tissue, wiped my tears and said it would all be OK, then helped me count down. Had she not been there I couldn't have done the surgery. I was so afraid of the risks.

My OB was good, but I got the standard care, I had no follow up from anyone to say that they recognised my previous trauma or to help me navigate the most stressful journey we had ever faced.

Our second daughter was born at 38 weeks after the cerclage was removed. My OB broke my waters and our second daughter arrived within 2.5 hours. A straightforward birth, but again not enough support. We were left alone to labour. I didn't think we would be taking a baby home at all. I hadn't prepared how to breastfeed and so quite obviously this was a huge challenge for me. I had no-one to tell me that my connection with my daughter wouldn't be immediate, or that I would still have to explain my story of loss to every person we met. Our second baby was here, but that didn't mean the trauma didn't exist anymore.

2020 – 39 Week Birth, Artificial Rupture of Membranes, 1.5 hour delivery, episiotomy

A straightforward pregnancy, this time with less medication and a cerclage placed at 14 weeks. We made it through to 39 weeks with our son. We did not feel we had a choice in how to birth. I was told to birth on my back, that I couldn't have a bath, that I had to have an episiotomy, that they had to rupture my membranes. I didn't realise I had a choice because no one made me feel like this was my choice. I was told this plan from 20 odd weeks and there was no changing of minds. My son's birth was only 1.5 hours long and was so fast, the contractions were back to back and I had no time to rest. I had no time to get my breathing sorted, I had no control. I vividly remember the contraction that the doctor performed by episiotomy on and will never forget it. I always wanted more children after our son, but literally hours after his birth I cried to my husband asking was it OK if we didn't have another baby because my son's birth had been so fast, painful and traumatic.

Conclusion

Birth shouldn't feel like this. Not in one of my births have I felt empowered, like the space was mine or the choice. I knew nothing that I should have known and was let down over and over again by people I thought I could trust and wasn't supposed to question.

Our life has changed so dramatically and losing a child is never something you get over. I have so much more power now. I have so much more control. And I will help other women find their voice and speak up for themselves and their baby like I wish I had done. I wish I had someone in my corner telling me what I could do and what the midwives and doctors shouldn't do. I wish I knew the ramifications. But hindsight is 20/20. So now I try to heal from the trauma while you consider how to prevent it.

Being the keeper of women's stories after pregnancy and infant loss, I know how traumatised people are in how they have been treated before, during and after loss. Some of the people around me have been dealt every possible blow and fallen through every possible crack. It is not an easy thing to write about a traumatic experience and bear your wounds for the world to see. So know that with every submission, is a hundred more who didn't feel ready, who couldn't face revisiting the worst day of their lives, who felt so let down and broken by their experience that they physically could not give you their submission.

I speak for myself. I speak for my daughter. I speak for my children who will birth more children. I speak for my husband and my family. I speak for those women who are unable to. Please do more. We can do so much better.