

Submission
No 941

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

On December 23rd 2019, I birthed my daughter at _____ Hospital after being transferred from the _____. My experience with the staff at _____ Hospital was disempowering and disrespectful, and it has taken me a long time to heal from the resulting trauma.

I was transferred to _____ Hospital due to mild meconium staining found when my waters broke naturally at home. Prior to driving up to _____, my partner and I met with our midwife at the _____ and she gently and calmly talked us through our situation. She reassured us that this did not necessarily mean that my baby was distressed, and she explained the likely interventions which are routine in our situation (induction of labour via syntocinon, foetal monitoring). My midwife reminded us that we would always have options regarding interventions. Looking back, I am so grateful for the way my midwife communicated with us in a calm woman-centered manner. Had I not been reassured that I had options in hospital, I may have been induced leading to a cascade of intervention, and the birth of my daughter may have taken a completely different course.

When we arrived at _____ Hospital we were met by a midwife, who communicated in a disrespectful, disempowering and demeaning manner. She told me that I would need to be induced (though I was already having regular contractions – which ‘she doubted’), that I would need to wear the foetal monitor throughout my entire labour and when I questioned my options around this, whether monitoring could be intermittent or depending on my progress, she told me I had no choice. She said that my midwife from _____ was lying to me and that she should report her for supporting my right to autonomy. This left me feeling terrified, unsafe and uncomfortable around this midwife and in the space where I was to give birth. Later when we had tried the monitoring for some hours and refused to continue, it was apparent there was another way, that I could be monitored every 15 minutes manually by the midwife on duty or my attending student midwife. This made me feel like I’d been lied to and that I couldn’t trust my care providers.

This feeling of not being safe around this midwife resulted in my partner and I labouring in the bathroom alone in the dark and with my student midwife (whom I trusted and who supported me and my choices), and these moments of my birth I remember feeling supported, safe and deeply in touch with my baby and my labouring body.

After some time, labouring privately in the bathroom, I was asked to be checked internally which I felt hesitant to but agreed. There was still an uneasy feeling amongst the staff, as though they were expecting or waiting for something terrible to happen. There definitely wasn’t a feeling that they believed I could birth my baby without them intervening. This internal check was extremely painful and left me feeling violated. When I measured at 2cm dilated I was apparently not labouring quick enough, despite my baby’s heart rate being normal and my intuition telling me that everything was okay within me. There was further talk of induction / syntocinon / pressure to intervene, despite my body labouring naturally and the staff being fully aware of my preference to avoid intervention.

There was a point in my labour where I felt very close to pushing. I was told not to push. To resist this natural urge until someone had ‘checked’ me. This told me that I was not trusted. That my body was not to be trusted and that I knew nothing about my own body and birth. That the midwife and the doctor knew better. At this point there were many people in the room all of a sudden. Faces I didn’t know and who hadn’t introduced themselves. A man standing with arms crossed. Talking down to me like I was nothing, lower than him. He was talking to me as if I was willingly hurting my baby. He talked of brain damage and threatened that I would need a cesarean section if I didn’t do what they wanted to do to me. At this point I didn’t fully understand the procedure he was recommending, the risks, the reason for doing it or what was involved. I wanted him to leave but I was in the peak of labour, experiencing

very frequent and painful contractions. I did not want to be in a room full of strangers being lectured about gruesome outcomes and fear. My partner spoke on behalf of me and told this man that he was rude (which he was - he entered without knocking, stood arms crossed and talked in a demeaning and violent manner) and asked him to leave. This man (the doctor) *refused to leave*. He was defensive of his violent communication and was defiant. He still refused to leave while I roared through a contraction, resisting the urge to push. Despite being in a state where I could barely talk, he wanted the words to come from me, like he didn't trust my partner's word, who was advocating for me and my choices. I roared through another huge contraction and told this man to leave. For everyone to leave. Only once he left could I relax enough to understand what they wanted to do. They wanted to take blood from my baby's head, which of course I did not want to do as her heart rate was normal and I had a strong intuitive feeling that she was okay. I felt a strong urge to push and I knew that I would meet her soon. On talking to my partner, we decided to do this test *purely* so that the staff would *leave us alone*. They then checked me internally which was extremely painful. I was indeed fully dilated and the head prick result showed that baby was normal and not distressed. I then was 'allowed' to push my baby down. Again I was left feeling violated, disrespected and belittled. I felt sad that I had to say yes to a procedure I didn't want to do so that I could have my human rights respected. My right to dignity, my right to privacy, my right to autonomy and my right to safety had all been disregarded.

The last part of my labour progressed naturally as I pushed my baby down. Finally I was left to birth with my body. I felt purpose and I was relieved that they didn't want to do more tests on me. That they let go of wanting to induce me with drugs or to do a c-section. Yet I still felt an overwhelming feeling that the midwives did not believe in me, that they didn't believe that I could birth my baby naturally. I heard one midwife saying to another midwife that she didn't believe I could do it, that 'she's still a long way off yet'. While I am *right next to her* pushing my baby down. This made me feel angry. I was raging and in fact was good fuel to prove these disrespectful women wrong. But it also made me feel like I wasn't safe. That I had to push her out quickly before this nasty male obstetrician came back wanting to intervene in some other way. This mix of rage and hurry followed me until my baby was crowning and I knew that she would be here soon. One of my midwives from _____ ended up coming and supporting me in these final moments of my labour. And she was amazing. She held the space with full belief that I could do it, that my baby would be in my arms soon. She advised me of position changes which would help ease my baby out. I feel so grateful that she was there to support me. Not long after she arrived, my baby was born. I birthed her without any induction or drugs, and with the support of my partner and my student midwife. And she was and is a perfectly healthy little girl.

After the birth the midwives at _____ hospital were very quick to clamp the umbilical cord despite my request that they wait until after the placenta is born. They did not wait. They also did not administer the Vitamin K injection despite it being written clearly on my birth plan that I wanted it given. After the birth the paediatrician came and advised that we stay in hospital (though my partner would have to go home...) as a precautionary measure due to the meconium present. My daughter was breathing well and had no signs that she was unwell and so we respectfully declined and decided to head home. We were understandably done with the hospital and wanted to get out of there as quickly as we could. We monitored our daughters breathing from home, though she recovered from birth normally and was healthy.

It has been a long journey coming to peace with our story, trying to focus on the positive and empowering aspects of my birth. However there is still some part of me that feels disrespected, violated and belittled when I think back to the care I received. I have felt a lot of anger and sadness.

In sharing my story here I hope that some change can be made so that women are treated with more respect and consideration when birthing in hospital. I submitted this story to the hospital as a formal complaint and had a follow up meeting with two representatives of Hospital. They were apologetic and talked of potential action with their staff. I asked to stay informed, however I never heard anything more from them, which is concerning. It concerns me to think that the midwife and senior male obstetrician involved may not have been reviewed for their actions and may continue to treat birthing women in this manner. I am sure that I am not the only one to have this experience.

I know that my story is not the worst there is. Hearing stories from close friends I know there is far worse and that birth trauma is far more prevalent among women than is discussed. Yet even in my story most of my basic human rights were disregarded, leaving me feeling unsafe, disrespected, and violated. And this was *purely from the interactions from my care providers*. And here I see a great problem with the way that maternity care is delivered in Australia. There needs to be a shift in the way we treat women in the birth space. The use of coercion and violent or misleading communication is simply not acceptable. At its core, this style of communication strips the women of her dignity, her autonomy and any feeling of safety. This is not safe maternity care.

Importantly, I hope that those in power can change the way that the rules and guidelines are structured. The systems and fundamental culture which influence midwives and obstetricians within their work. We must move towards a more woman-centered approach to birth, trusting in women's bodies and in birth as a normal part of life, not as an illness or a problem. We need to start respecting women's choices. Empowering women to *know* they have a choice within the hospital system. A big part of the problem is the way in which (many) care providers communicate with parents from a place of superiority, and from a fear mindset in order to persuade and pressure parents to follow along with the routine interventions. This is incredibly sad, considering how many parents would be easily persuaded by these tactics and who are left feeling disempowered and traumatised by this sacred moment in one's life.