

Submission  
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## INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

**Name:** Name suppressed

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Partially  
Confidential

I experienced disrespectful and unsupportive treatment in pregnancy and during labour on a number of occasions.

From my first visit with an overpriced and over booked GP I felt unsupported. I was 8 weeks pregnant at the time and I felt like I received bare minimum information, referrals that I couldn't afford and suggestions of private care. I work in the public education system and believe equal education and health care shouldn't be only for those with money... i felt like her care was aimed at upper class, white women. I was also shocked to find out that there was no continuity of care in the public system.

I quickly changed to my childhood doctor. A lovely Indian women, a thirty minute drive south in a low socioeconomic area. She is highly experienced in caring for children. I can't fault her care.

I'm a first time mum so I wasn't entirely sure what to expect from birth and labour. I'm very privileged to have a long maternity leave, starting around 30 weeks so I was able to read into the type of birth I wanted, my right to say no, other's horrific stories of how they'd been treated in the hospital system...

On the day I went into labour I had been tracking what I thought could be my contractions since 3.30pm. They were becoming more frequent and more intense. At 7.30/8pm my mucus plug fell out. I was so happy that labour was finally getting started! But I googled and it said that labour could still be up to 3 days away. I googled the pattern of my contractions too and it said about 1-3 days away as well. I was eager - will my baby be here tonight or over the next few days? We went to bed thinking we will reassess in the morning. I couldn't fall asleep because the contractions were getting longer, stronger and about 10 minutes apart.

At about 10.30 I called the birthing unit and asked what I should do. They said to ride it out at home until I can't manage the pain. Around 11pm I felt a trickle like I was wetting myself. I checked my pad and it was strawberry coloured waters! I started shaking because I was flooded with emotions - excitement, curiosity, nerves...

I called the birthing unit back, voice shaking. The midwife who answered spoke coldly and said to come in. I began crying because I was overwhelmed with emotion and already didn't feel very supported by who I was speaking to on the phone. During this transformative and life changing experience, a woman deserves to be honoured and respected.

When we got to the hospital, the inappropriate treatment began. The same midwife I had spoken to on the phone, said 'next time, leave your bags in the car' before asking how I was or checking in with us. As a first time mum I had packed a lot as I wanted to feel as comfortable as possible so that I would labour smoothly. I had read about what works best and I knew what I needed. My husband would have had to leave me and carry the bags on his own from our car which was parked quite far, if we hadn't brought them with us at the time. The midwife must have known it was our first time as

she had seen my records. Yet she was still so dismissive and cold. I couldn't help but think 'You know it's our first time so if you don't want us to bring our bags, why not tell us that on the phone'.

We went into the assessment room and she did a test to see if it was definitely my amniotic fluid leaking (it was) and she monitored my daughter's heart rate. My contractions were 5 minutes apart now, uncomfortable but not too intense. The midwife asked us to wait for the Doctor's opinion but he was in emergency. She was dismissive of how I was feeling which brought me to tears again.

After an hour she tried to send us home as she said that it sounded like I was "very far off". Again, I felt unsupported by the system. My partner and I were thinking about going home when I suddenly remembered that I was GBS positive and that when you're GBS positive if your waters break you need to be in hospital. When I mentioned this to her she told me she didn't know, despite it being on my antenatal record card and telling them during my last visit just a week before. She also had no idea I was allergic to penicillin despite that also being on my record and discussed at every antenatal appointment. I thought how dangerous this was as they give you penicillin as the antibiotic for GBS.

Since doing my own reading partum, I have learnt that I'm the UK they only screen for GBS when you are high risk. However in the US and Australia they do universal screening (everyone is tested). This leads to the unnecessary use of antibiotics on babies which can have adverse effects and is simply uncomfortable and Unnatural for the mum to birth hooked up to a drip. Half of the women who test positive before birth are actually GBS negative at the time of birth, yet still receive the drip. I wish these numbers had been explained to me before testing. I know I won't go ahead with it next time.

Around 3.30am she finally escorted us to a birthing suite, despite the birthing unit 'being empty' (her words). I felt as though we were an inconvenience to her.

We waited for the doctor. My contractions became stronger and stronger and I was shocked by the 'bloody show'. I was glad I was in the hospital as the midwife assured me it was normal. Thankful We hadn't been sent home as everything can be quite scary during your first birthing experience.

A second midwife came in and I had high hopes she'd be more supportive. I was disappointed to find that she was even more coercive than the first midwife. The first thing they said when they barged in was "we'll hook you up to the antibiotics and get this induction started". No one had said anything about an induction. Luckily I had read similar stories to this and done my own reading (which I believe should be education provided by hospitals) about the cascade of interventions and I was sure I didn't want an induction. I was also very aware of my right to say no. However, what about those who haven't got the privilege of doing their own reading because they are time poor? Or those with English as a second language? A disability? First Nations people's and marginalised groups?

Those who let fear take over because of the fear our so called 'care providers' instil in us? Way too many people fear the hospital system. It makes you question 'why?' ...

When I questioned the induction they said the doctor had requested I have syntocinon to speed things up as the longer labour takes the higher the risk GBS will travel up to baby. I was a bit delirious by this point and couldn't remember why I didn't want syntocinon but I knew I didn't. We asked if they could remind us of the pros and cons but the midwife danced around the question. I wasn't given the evidence-based, unbiased information I was hoping for.

I started to remember that syntocinon brings labour on hard and fast resulting in women often asking for an epidural or other intervention being needed. I didn't want to start the cascade of intervention but also of course I wanted baby to be safe. The midwife then asked what my time frame was and how fast I expected to 'get things started'. I felt like she was pushing me into a corner.. this was the pressure and coercion I had heard about in other's birth stories. I was furious but trying to stay calm for a positive birthing experience. For myself and for my baby.

I didn't know how long I would labour for.

She was really beginning to annoy my partner too. She began saying 'I can give you two some time to think about it' but wouldn't leave the room and was just looking at us with her arms crossed as if to say "so what are you going to do?". My husband had to get stern and asked her to give us a ballpark of how long they would usually give someone. She said something along the lines of 'do you want to be like this in here all day? For all you know you might not progress until tonight. you can't labour in here all day. You'll be moved back to the maternity ward if you aren't progressing..' and again she danced around the question. It felt like a threat.

Around 6am the doctor came. He was the OB I had seen at my last antenatal appointment who had made me uncomfortable, asking, what seemed to me and my partner like inappropriate questions, essentially mocking my birth plan. Feeling unsupported during pregnancy and labour seemed to be the norm that everyone accepted...

The OB explained that they'd need to see if my waters had completely broken and if not they'd have to break my forewaters. Then they'd typically give 2 hours to wait for active labour to begin. I asked if we could try getting me into active labour naturally in 2.5-3 hours and then reassess re syntocinon he said good luck with it. Thankfully we didn't see him again!

The second midwife checked my cervix which was 3cm dilated and said that my cervix was soft and almost fully effaced. She was very surprised by it because they kept calling my contractions 'sporadic' and 'mild' and that I was only having 'a few'. Clearly they thought I wasn't progressing despite me telling them that I was. Despite having told them numerous times I had been tracking them and they were becoming more frequent and increasing in intensity. I was now hooked up to

machines, had an IV drip and could only laugh at how opposite this was to what I wanted- an active water birth. Luckily after the antibiotics I was able to disconnect from the IV and stop the CTG.

The first midwife then did some last checks and told me if I wanted to do this naturally now was the time to get moving. They all finally left us alone. The suite was actually so spacious and comfy for a public hospital. It had a birthing ball, electric candles, peanut balls, birthing stool etc.

At about 7.30 the midwives changed shifts and I was lucky to be left with two very caring midwives. They were so supportive and really advocated for me. They helped me stick to my birth plan throughout the labour. Both of them were so positive, made lots of eye contact and assured me that everything was going well.

As the contractions intensified, I asked whether it was too late for an epidural. But the nurses were so good and offered other pain relief. I decided I'd try a heat pack, shower and gas.

During the pushing stage baby's heart rate dropped and an OB turned up out of no where. I never saw them, only heard her voice, as I was facing over the bed ready to birth my daughter. I was so grateful it was a female OB. However immediately I freaked out. I had been told 'when you see an OB something isn't going as planned and they will likely intervene'. She spoke to the midwives with a sense of urgency as apparently my daughters heart rate was dropping. She coached me through the last few pushes. The stress of the OB entering the room and the possibility of intervention lead me to push for my life. All of a sudden I didn't care if I tore, or even if I died. As long as my baby was born healthy. My baby girl was finally born, the OB out of sign by the time I reached for my daughter between my legs. There was no continuity of care. But at the time I didn't give it a thought. I was used to it by now. I was just so grateful for the incredible midwives I had for the active labour and birth of my baby.

With gas as the only pain relief and just my forewaters being broken, I was so proud that I was able to stick to my birth plan as best as I could. I was lucky to have amazing midwives for my daughters birth. But what about those women who aren't privileged with the time and resources to read and watch videos about how to have a positive birth? Or those who are unlucky and have cold and unsupportive care providers for the entire birth? Those care providers who rush you through the system and instil fear. Those who coerce you and make you feel like you have no other choice... i believe it's a problem so deep in the system. I've thought about why it is the way it is many times since my daughters birth. Is it the lack of staff? being under paid? Perhaps the nasty midwives were unsupportive because of the night shift? But why no continuity of care?

Our first afternoon was incredible. However as soon as my partner had to leave at 9pm I was filled with anxiety. I burst into tears as soon as he left. It felt so counterintuitive. Being left with our baby and forced to separate from her father for a night. I've heard so many women have the same experience. I barely knew how to change a nappy or put my baby to sleep. Yet I was left alone in a dark room to figure it out. Luckily the midwives took her for the night. But still, it felt so wrong. I needed someone to show me how to do it. It wasn't something that I just knew, despite all of my

reading and video watching. I was clueless. I finally fell asleep, around 2am and awoke at 6am. This was the first sleep I had in 48 hours and the longest I had for the next 2 months. Another reason the birthing mother deserves the utmost respect. The act of caring for your child and breast feeding, is the most selfless act on earth. The sleepless nights, the pain, the changes. I could go on forever...

After birth during a visit from one of the midwives (these were extremely positive experiences and were done really well) a midwife had told me it was a possibility to do a home birth through the MGP. I was shocked as no one had told me that this was an option before birth, yet it was exactly what I had wanted. At 8 weeks pregnant I had applied for the MGP but was unable to get in, despite applying as soon as I heard about it...

If I am lucky enough to fall pregnant again and have another low risk pregnancy, it is my goal to labour and give birth at home. I will apply for the MGP as soon as I can (hopefully earlier than last time) as I dream about giving birth in water, in the comfort of my own home, without the unnecessary interventions that I felt coerced into last time. If this isn't a possibility, I will have to fork out the money to pay for private care providers to assist in a home birth. I'm definitely privileged to be able to do so. However, it will put financial hardship on my family as we are currently saving for a house.

Studies show how important the birth of a baby is on both the mum's wellbeing and baby's. Which in turn affects the whole family unit... so it is worth it. Birth is not honoured and respected the way it deserves to be. Not by society and certainly not my public or private hospitals. It's not an issue of 'public verse private' as I have heard some people argue this misconception. It is an issue of any birthing woman.

However, I do acknowledge some conditions are better in the private sector. It is not perfect either. The cascade of interventions is even more prevalent there.

I continue to hear stories from other mothers in the community of their traumatic births. I want to tell them that maybe it all began when you were coerced into an intervention because your care provider instilled fear in you. But that's not my job. It's one for the government to take into their hands.