

**Submission
No 1421**

INQUIRY INTO BIRTH TRAUMA

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Date Received: 13 August 2023

Dear Members of the Committee,

I am writing to share my personal experiences and perspectives on behalf of women who have encountered birth trauma. As a woman who has personally experienced birth trauma I hope to shed light on the impact it can have on individuals and families.

I, (insert name), have experienced birth trauma firsthand through two extremely traumatic births, almost 4 years between both of them. From both the births I feel like a rape victim. I feel like I was raped but it was 'ok' that it happened. I was completely violated through vaginal examinations even when I said no, because I was so young (I was 20 when I had my first child.)

The specifics of my first encounter with birth trauma are as follows:

I was constantly told what I was going to do. 'Get on the bed', 'you have to stop screaming', 'you are not allowed into the bathroom', 'you have to open to door'.

I locked myself into the bathroom to hide because it was the only place I wasn't able to be touched. The only time I was able to get back into my breath and relax into my labour, that was when the midwife was saying to me 'I have to check you now' and before I had even a chance to say no she was already touching me. I remember at one point I was screaming 'get your hands out of me' because she put her whole hand up inside me and it was so uncomfortable.

When I was in the bathroom hiding I locked my partner out and my partner knocked and begged me to let him in and I told him no because they will come in and they need to stay away from me and I told him I'd let him in only if he didn't let them in. So, he came in and when he was in, they were banging on the door and telling me that I was putting myself and my baby at risk if I didn't open the door and let them in and they'd have to go and get a key and come in anyway. I remember just looking at my partner and I was crying and saying I don't want to let them in but they will force their way in if i keep saying no. So I felt like I had no choice.

Because of the constant violating of my body and the bullying I asked for an epidural because I wanted it all to stop and them to go away and I thought they'd leave me alone if I had it. They told me with an epidural they needed to monitor the baby and so they were going to put a little clip on his head. But they didn't tell me it was actually a screw.

Once I had the epidural and an Ob came in because they had the monitor on. Within 10 mins they told me i needed a cesarean because of meconium and because the heart rate was really low and so within a few minutes I was wheeled into a cesarean section. No one explained anything to me.

And then second birth I avoided the hospital. I planned freebirth so didn't actually register myself to the hospital until late in the pregnancy and the only reason I did that I suddenly thought 'what if? what if something goes wrong and I needed to go and they had no records.'

I thought I'd go to 1-2 appts and let them know I was pregnant and I might need to go to hospital but that I planned to birth at home. When I met with them, they tried to say that because of my my last birth that I shouldn't go for a vaginal birth and caesarean would be more straightforward. They actually said they were supportive of it, but they booked me in for a c-section anyway ... so I had a date for a caesarean 'just in case'.

In a second antenatal appointment I had an Ob and student come in and she said to me I had to drink the diabetes drink because I was presenting as big and my BMI was high and the baby was measuring big and that could be because I had diabetes. I told them I don't think I need to do that because my first baby was 9 pounds and if this baby was presenting big too then I probably just have big babies. I also explained that I had a naturopath who told me I probably didn't need to have that test and she told me that that a naturopath isn't a doctor so doesn't really know.

She also told me she had to do a vaginal exam as routine, but she didn't tell me what it was for. I said I was not comfortable with that. And she said to me, 'but you've had a baby before haven't you?'. When I said yes, she said 'so haven't you had one of these before?' I told them not in my pregnancy and she replied 'oh that's strange, what are you afraid of?' I said I don't feel comfortable in a bright room with a student and you both doing a vaginal exam. I eventually gave in due to bullying and while she was already doing it she said, "I am just going to do a stretch and sweep' and I had no idea what that was until actually years down the line, so there was no explanation or informed consent. I had no idea what she was doing. Just while she was performing the examination and her hands were already inside me, and THEN told me what that she was doing that.

So I presented to the hospital because I was in pre labour. Although I didn't know I was in prelabour I just didn't know what to expect. I was only 23 and I had no idea what I was doing - trying to freebirth without doing any work or healing from previous birth, I can see that now. And I didn't know what was happening but anyway I had contractions that were not far apart at home, and I started to vomit and I started second guessing myself and thought maybe I should be in hospital - so I went in and told them I was vomiting and had pressure on my belly and that I wasn't feeling much movement. All I wanted was to have a check of the heartbeat and go home. And they had me there for hours on a monitor. They said they could see that I was having contractions but they were really far apart and were going to keep me overnight for observation and when I said I wanted to go home they said they had a duty of care and I had to stay... so I decided to stay and come home in the morning.

Later that night I had a shower and got changed and after I got out of the shower then my waters broke. Within mins of this I had contractions that went from 0-100 (in sensation/pain) which made me feel I was going to fall to my knees. I had only 2 and it felt like so much I thought to myself I had to contact the midwife because I felt myself spiralling out of control. I didn't know what to expect and I told her it felt strange. I asked if she could move me to a room with a bath because my plan was a water birth. She told me there were none available and because my waters had broken and because I'd had previous c section and had to be constantly monitored that I wouldn't be allowed in anyway. I asked her why I had to have the band monitor on because it made my belly hurt and contractions feel worse. She said no you have to have this and you are at higher risk and she didn't tell me risk of what? I asked if I could at least go in the shower because I wanted to find a way to ease the intensity, I just couldn't get my breath. And she told me no I couldn't go in the shower due to the monitor.

Because I had the monitor on, I emotionally went back to my first birth because of the fear and the memory of it feeling it was all happening again. Two more midwives came in (by the way it was a tiny room) and it was like

sardines in there, and an Ob came in and sat on computer and monitored something - possibly my contractions. They were talking over me. Chatting about anything and not acknowledging me. The midwife was asking 'what level (contraction) is she having?' and he said 'ha! they are only mid' and I thought I was in a lot of pain and spiralling out of control. I asked if they'd called my partner and they said no. So asked them to call him. I asked to go home and labour there and they said I wasn't allowed and if I did they'd have to call the police to do a welfare check and I wouldn't want that would I. I just wanted to get out of there to feel safe and they basically held me there against my will.

I kept labouring and contractions became more and more intense. People kept walking in and out. They acted like I wasn't a labouring woman. Like I wasn't a priority, no one cared what I was doing. I was left alone but so many people there in the room. After one of the contractions I felt so out of control, I asked for epidural, I felt like I couldn't do it anymore, there were so many lights, noises, normal conversations around me and I felt so out of it.

The Ob said 'let me do a vaginal exam and see how dilated you are before we do the epidural'. He was a male and I was so traumatised by the first birth I said no and he said "well we don't know how far along you are and you could be further along, if you want the epidural I am going to have to examine you.' So I felt like I had no other option but to comply so I could numb out ... I just kept thinking I shouldn't be doing this again, I should never have had another baby.

By the time it was time for epidural my partner arrived and he tried to talk me out of epidural, but it was too late by then I wasn't present, I was completely disassociated from my body. I had the epidural and went to sleep. I woke up to contractions and was really cold. They then moved me to a new room and another midwife came in and she said this is my student and lets try to get the baby out before Obs come around. She opened blinds and it was sunny and the light was so bright and hot and she basically directed me and told me to push. I pushed 4 times and the Ob came in and when they came in I saw it was the one who was in the antenatal appointment (with the non consented stretch and sweep). She said she had to check what was happening so she did another vaginal exam and said to me 'sorry you'll be having a caesarean today' She said she had a raised head, it's been too long, and I wasn't progressing fast enough. I asked for my time, and she said you've already been in here for an hour so I'm not risking that.

I went into theatre and the surgeon / Ob (male) said he was going to try with forceps before I have to go in and do a c-section. I didn't know what forceps were at that time. I didn't know what was going on it wasn't explained to me. I was completely traumatised by that point. He did the forceps and tried but then said we have to do the c-section anyway.

After the c-section all I remember is my partner looking at me and saying 'look what we had' I saw the baby and thought it was another boy and he said, no it's a girl. They gave her to me but I couldn't hold her my arms were too weak. I fell asleep and woke up with a male nurse in the room and I didn't have my baby. I said 'what's going on? Did I have a baby? Where is my baby?' and he laughed and said she was in nursery and I was in recovery and I'd have to stay here for a while.

Before I had the c-section I said I didn't want the cord clamped until it had stopped pulsing. and wanted to keep the placenta. The Ob said, 'why do you want that?' and said we would do our best.

And when I asked male nurse sitting by my bed about my placenta he said he had no idea and he got up and started vigorously pushing on my belly and it was really painful. I hadn't any idea why he was doing it and I asked him to stop and he said 'no I need to do this to make sure you have no blood loss' and he pushed hard and harder.

When they did bring her in to me, I had her for 5mins and they said they had to take her away again and she had to spend time in ICU because of her temperature and she was sleepy, and she was in there for 10 days.

The first 2 days I didn't get to see her because I couldn't walk and no one came with a wheelchair to take me up. I had called my aunty to say what was going on and she asked my why I'd not been up and asked me didn't anyone come to take you? So she and another aunty drove up to be with me so I could see her.

I was in a room at the back of the hospital and I had no idea where my baby was. My partner was with her for some of the time and he came back without her and he told me 'they keep doing stuff to her and they are getting students to do it all and she has bruises in her hands because of all the needles and she's screaming and she was in pain.'

I called the nurses station and I told them if you put another needle in her I'm going to have to call the police, because I haven't given my consent to any of this. And she had bruises all over her.

And they also vaccinated her without asking me, even though I'd said I didn't want that and they did it in ICU while I wasn't present, without consent.

Having reflected upon my experience, I believe that several factors contributed to my birth trauma. These factors may include;

- poor communication
- not listening to my needs/wants
- no informed consent to procedures
- fear tactics
- bullying
- coercive language

- misleading language

- no respect for bodily autonomy, women are not supposed to feel like they have been raped after they give birth.

Being so emotionally unavailable that they can have conversations over the top of you while someone is labouring... surely midwives are there because they are passionate?! You don't talk about what you're having for dinner or what the Ob's day has been like.

The longer term effects of my experiences were severe. I had postnatal depression with son and prolonged PND with my daughter. I was really unable to be connected and bonded with her for the first 2 years of her life. I am not in a relationship with my partner anymore but I held a lot of anger and hate towards him because of the experience as well.

I was given no opportunity to debrief my birth, no hospital staff asked me about anything. I haven't actually ever spoken of this until now and this is the first time I've been able to do any type of processing.

I trained to be a doula in 2019, and had to leave the profession because of the trauma - my duty of care was not to walk into other birth spaces when I'm still carrying that.

Drawing from my personal journey, I would like to propose specific solutions and changes to enhance maternity care in Australia, with the aim of preventing future instances of birth trauma. The following are the changes I advocate for:

whole reform of the birthing system. The whole thing needs to be changed. Revise ALL policies

shouldn't be an insurance job

complete overhaul - all needs to change

midwives and Obs have to do a completely new training to break the beliefs that they have so that no more pain is inflicted on women and children.

some of them truly believe that they are doing the right thing but they are not, they are causing trauma

Thank you for considering my submission. I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute my experiences and viewpoints to the committee's ongoing inquiry. If necessary, I am willing to provide additional evidence during a hearing to further support my perspective.

With sincere appreciation,

Jasmine Thom