



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, AGEING AND COMMUNITY SERVICES
Ms Bec Cody MLA (Chair), Mrs Vicki Dunne MLA (Deputy Chair)
Ms Caroline Le Couteur MLA

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Maternity Services in the ACT

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[REDACTED]

I have had 2 children at The Canberra Hospital, one in 2015 and one in 2018. I would like to share my story as part of The Legislative Assembly's Internal Review. I believe my story can provide insight to several of the points of reference. I would like all my personal details, including my name, to remain private from the public.

Birth 1: [REDACTED] 2015

In [REDACTED] 2015 I was referred to The Canberra Hospital (TCH) Maternity for care during my pregnancy and birth of my daughter who was due [REDACTED]. My whole pregnancy I recall having very little contact with ACT Health, my records show only 2 antenatal appointments. I felt anxious, unprepared and had very little knowledge. Around [REDACTED] 2015 I had become increasingly frustrated that I was unable to get any information or support from the hospital. I did not have a regular GP and could not seem to get anything from TCH. One of many phone calls to the TCH to try and work out what was going on I was invited in to talk to a manager of the birthing suites. She advised me that TCH were too busy to support me in my pregnancy and suggested I go to Queanbeyan Hospital. Unfortunately, I did not get accepted to Queanbeyan Hospital.

On the [REDACTED] I attended TCH, accompanied by my husband, because of a concern over a small patch of bright red blood. I was placed in a small room, that had two beds on wheels, the other one occupied by a woman in labour. The room appeared to be makeshift. With no medical equipment or windows I believe it may have been storage room. The woman was clearly in labour, having contractions regularly. I heard the medical staff discussing her, that she had a previous caesarean overseas, reason unknown, so they could not send her home, but they did not have room for her.

After examining me the doctor told me that they did not know where the blood came from, but my baby was full term so "better out than in" and that I would be induced. There was no discussion of risks of the induction or request for informed consent. A cannula was placed in my hand. They did not ask for my consent or explain why this was needed. The doctor placed a bloody needle on the chair next to my bed. He went to sit down on the chair next to me and I alerted him to the fact he was about to sit on a used needle. He looked exhausted. As I had expected to only go in for monitoring my car was parked in the small parking lot outside the women's and children's hospital. I received a parking fine during this time which suspended my cars registration for around 6 months.

On [REDACTED] I was transferred to the antenatal ward where I waited for 2 nights until a birth room became available. On the third day staff came and told me there was no room for me to give birth now and I could go home. I became confused and upset, having received very little information and believing my baby was in danger I refused to leave.

On the morning of [REDACTED] I was moved to a birth suite and induced. I asked to have a bath and was told I wasn't allowed. I was left alone unless I buzzed for a midwife, the midwife would come in and make a quick comment, or exam and leave again.. A doctor came to check me at 10pm and said they would return at 10am. Shortly after this my waters broke. I buzzed for help and I was given panadiene and told to go to sleep and again left alone. I didn't sleep I was in too much pain. The midwives seemed angry that I had disturbed them whenever I buzzed. They did not always respond to the buzzer and when they did were often angry. A couple of hours later I buzzed a midwife and was administered an injection of something. In the early hours of the morning I was given gas. I found all pain relief so far ineffective. The midwives changed often and one point the midwife was a man, working unaccompanied, which my husband and I both found very uncomfortable.

Early on the morning of [REDACTED] staff offered an epidural and I accepted. I was given no information on risks. When the epidural was administered I remember looking down and seeing a large pool of bright red blood over my clothing and the bed, at least the size of a basketball. I became panicked and asked what it was. No one explained this and everyone in the room ignored my request for an explanation, my fear and my requests for help.

Once the epidural was administered I remember a new midwife and a new student midwife mostly being around the birthing suite. This was the first time someone had been consistently present during my labour. I was not asked for consent for the student to attend.

I don't recall getting any food or water in the birth suite. I remember my sister bringing me food in the morning of [REDACTED] as I was hungry from not having eaten in so long.

The epidural was self-administering, I could still feel everything however it took the edge off the pain. I still had control over all my limbs and could move freely. I was not allowed to walk around anymore, all though I could have, I did move positions on my own to my hands and knees. While I was in this position the midwife commented that I was fully dilated because of a purple line on my backside. The midwife showed my husband and said it appears when a woman is fully dilated. I did not realise what she was talking about at the time, but that mark is always there.

At some point around here a clip was placed on my daughter's head via my vagina for monitoring. I was not asked for consent nor explained why this was happening or what the risks were.

The midwife was coaching me to push. After a while she left the room and came back with a young [REDACTED] lady doctor. I believe her name was [REDACTED]. She told me to get on my back they were going to vacuum the baby out. I was not asked for consent or explained why this was happening or what risks were involved. I remember Dr [REDACTED] being by right leg and another unknown woman being by my left leg. I could see the woman to my left was holding something metal.

I asked her "What is that?"

She responded "It's to cut you"

I said "I don't want to be cut"

She responded aggressively "you have no choice!"

They attempted the vacuum four times without success. The woman did not cut me, despite making it very clear she would without my consent.

I later discovered that I was not fully dilated during this procedure, that it was likely performed in error. My guess is that I was presumed to be fully dilated because of the line on my bum and pushed in to inappropriate intervention.

Things became very flurried around this time.

Dr [REDACTED] came in to the room. The ladies left. I was laying on my back on the bed. My husband was by my left leg, Dr [REDACTED] was by my right leg. The midwife and the student midwife were on the far wall, parallel to my chest and head area. Dr [REDACTED] placed two fingers in to my anus. He did not explain why or ask for consent. I felt sick and violated. I complained about this to the hospital later and was advised there was no medical reason for this type of exam to be carried out. As there was no medical explanation for this I believe I was sexually assaulted.

Lots of people began to come and go. The midwife handed me a consent form and told me to sign it, that I would need to go for a caesarean because the vacuum didn't work, and my daughters heart rate was dropping. I declined at least 5 times, they told me I didn't have a choice I had to sign the form. I refused again. The staff took my husband in to the hallway with my mother. My mother and husband have told me that the staff said my baby was dying, her heart rate was dropping and to make me sign the form before I killed the baby. My mother and husband came back in to the room and my mother relayed the information. She told me to sign the form that my baby was dying. Dr [REDACTED] told me if I signed the form they would just take me to theatre to have a better look in the better lighting, but they wouldn't perform a caesarean

unless it was absolutely necessary. Staff gave me the form again and told me to sign it, I didn't read it, I signed it and cried the whole time.

During the complaint process with the hospital I later discovered that my daughters heart rate was within normal range. It was dropping with contractions and rising again. I was told I could have continued to labour safely. I was told that the official reason for the caesarean was "maternal fatigue".

I was wheeled out of the birthing suite, as I left the midwife hit my epidural button several times until it maxed out. She told me I would need it. I was taken alone to a waiting area surrounded by other random people. My mother and husband were left behind to clean up the birth suite as someone was waiting for it. I was so panicked that I was hyperventilating. I kept begging for them not to take me to theatre. I kept repeating "no, please don't". I am not sure how long I waited for. I would guess at least half an hour. I was moved to theatre. In the theatre Dr [REDACTED] examined me and told me "You're not fully dilated, I am sorry you never would have had this baby naturally". He told me I was not a candidate for forceps and they would perform a caesarean. I was hysterically begging for him not to.

They began preparing for the caesarean. When I realised they wouldn't listen to my requests to stop I asked to be knocked unconscious. They refused and said I could not be under a general because it would hurt the baby. They performed the caesarean with the epidural. I have never been in so much pain in my life. I told them I could feel it and I asked them to stop. The young female anaesthesiologist told me it was normal. I was in so much I began vomiting. My husband was horrified he asked them to stop, he said they were hurting me. They continued to perform the surgery against the will of myself and against the will of my next of kin, all the time without adequate pain relief.

At [REDACTED] my daughter [REDACTED] was delivered via caesarean section. I was told they had to forcep her out as she was stuck in the birth canal from the failed vacuum. They delivered my daughter, flashed her in front of me, and then left the room with her. I told my husband to follow the baby. He asked them to stop and asked where they were going. The staff ignored him and walked out of the room with our child while I was incapacitated.

I was moved to recovery. In an open room surrounded by strange people I continued to complain about the pain. Staff kept asking where my husband was and wouldn't respond or acknowledge any of my requests for pain relief. I was handed my daughter, [REDACTED], after they checked her and gave her an injection. I asked how to feed her, the woman ignored me, but when she saw me trying to feed [REDACTED] she told me not to suffocate her.

When my husband returned from the bathroom they moved me to the maternity ward. I was placed in a shared room with a woman who had several visitors and members of my husband's family who were waiting for me. I don't know how they knew where I was going and didn't want to see anyone. I was crying uncontrollably, I was violated and scared and in an extreme amount of pain. I told the midwives about my pain again as they placed me in Maternity and they said there's nothing they can do I have to wait for a doctor. They removed the buzzer from me and left the room.

I was in excruciating pain. I sent my husband out to get help. They kept telling me that they couldn't help. Almost an hour later a doctor arrived and offered me tramadol. I advised I couldn't take tramadol as I'd had an allergic reaction in the past. He told me I didn't react when they gave it to me earlier. I did not receive any tramadol during my stay, and had not experienced any allergic reactions, but he was adamant my records stated I had been given it. They said I had a fever and tried to take my baby away from me. I was bed ridden and wouldn't let them.

Staff could not offer me food as they had nothing vegetarian so told me I could not have dinner. My sister brought my husband and I in takeaway food. My husband left his food at the foot of my bed. A midwife came in and yelled at me for lying about being vegetarian to just be difficult,

pointing out my husband's meal as proof. She told me that my husband had to leave, that he couldn't stay with me. I was terrified after everything that happened and I said if he was leaving I was too. They said that wasn't a choice, that he would have to leave by 9pm.

My mum went to talk to staff and sometime later they came back and said that I could be moved to a room in the antenatal ward, but my husband would have to look after me. We were moved to antenatal ward and left to fend for ourselves. Nurses would come in and check vitals. A doctor came in (the same one from my admission) and took some blood. He said they need to check it because I lost a lot of blood in theatre. I continued to beg for pain relief but was given very little. I was made to feel guilty by the midwives, I was told I shouldn't take pain medication, it was normal to be in pain and I needed to feed my baby. They would try to talk me out of medication and if I insisted they would negotiate a smaller dose. At no point during my stay at the hospital was my pain ever under control. I would rate my pain between 8-10/10.

My husband was caring for the baby and had little time to care for me. The nurses made it clear they had no time for me, that my husband was responsible for my care. After the first night of caring for the baby he fell asleep once I woke. A midwife came in and saw him sleeping. She threw a pair of stockings at him and screamed for him to wake up. She said he wasn't allowed to sleep and had to put stockings on me. She left the room. He placed the stockings on me, but he felt uncomfortable being at the hospital and started going home. I was scared to be at the hospital, especially alone. When staff came in to my room I would burst in to tears.

At the hospital I kept falling unconscious in the hospital. I would get waves of extreme fatigue. I would feel so tired like I had been drugged and would pass out holding the baby. As I was bedridden it was of no consequence, but it scared me. I brought this up with 3 different midwives as they appeared and received the following responses.

"haha, welcome to motherhood."

"This is why I have dogs and not kids." While Rolling eyes.

"It's normal to be tired."

This was likely due to untreated blood loss. I lost an estimated 800mls blood and they forgot to treat me for it. This was revealed [REDACTED] at discharge when the doctor made a vague reference to continuing treatment for my iron deficiency due to my blood loss. When this was discovered that they haven't treated me I was told to go get iron supplements form the chemist when I leave.

My child had severe bruising on her head. She was yellow in colour. I thought she was jaundice and from the first day postpartum. She screamed constantly, I kept buzzing the nurses saying something was wrong, but everyone dismissed my pleas for help. I kept asking nurses about her colour. I kept getting told she looked fine. On the third day they weighed her. She had dropped too much weight and was being starved. I found out later this was due to my body being so sick and traumatised it couldn't produce milk. Every day she got more yellow and by day 3 staff finally agreed that she was yellow. She tested positive for jaundice, I was told this is from a toxin build up from the severe bruising on her head and not being able to pass the toxins as she had been starved. She was placed on formula. I really wanted to breastfeed, so I asked to see a lactation consultant. They sent a lactation consultant to see me on [REDACTED]. She told me everything looked fine, there's nothing she can do to help me and to just go buy some formula on the way home.

On the [REDACTED] I was discharged from TCH. The severe abdominal pain persisted. Over the next two weeks I also experienced extreme fatigue, migraines, high fevers, severe swelling. When the symptoms started I called TCH for help and they told me they couldn't help me anymore, that they weren't concerned about my symptoms, nor responsible for my care but if I was concerned to go to the Emergency Department (ED). I felt so physically weak and sick that I could not leave my bed. I could not drive and lived on the second story. I could not find a way to ED and after the response from Maternity I felt I would be laughed at if I called an ambulance and would likely receive no treatment at hospital as I was made to feel my symptoms were normal. The gynaecologist who performed a laparoscopy in [REDACTED] 2018 advised me that I had an usual

amount of damage from just one caesarean and it looked like I had suffered from a severe infection.

My family and I all suffered ongoing health problems from the trauma sustained at TCH. My husband was diagnosed with severe depression and spent a year in an in patient rehabilitation centre. My daughter had bruising on her head from the vacuum so severe it lasted almost a year. Because of this I could not touch her head, place her down on the bed or in the car seat or even put a beanie on her head. Any of these actions would cause her to scream in agony. She had jaundice and hip dysplasia. I have been diagnosed with Post Natal Depression (PND), Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), chronic pain, severe adhesions, vaginal prolapse, faecal and urinary incontinence and ongoing bowel disturbances including pain and bleeding.

I waited 2 years to see the gynaecologist and OASIS clinic at TCH, Dr [REDACTED] and Dr [REDACTED]. They were very dismissive and blamed all my symptoms on my lifestyle. Due to my debilitating physical and psychological problems I have had a very poor quality of life since having my daughter. I left in tears feeling as though they were unwilling to help me to avoid taking responsibility for the damage sustained during childbirth. On the [REDACTED] I had surgery at Queanbeyan Hospital through Dr [REDACTED], a gynaecologist I saw privately. She said that I had severe adhesion, that my bowels were up under my ribs and my uterus was on my right-hand side abdominal wall. My left tube is damaged beyond repair and could not be unblocked. Basically, nothing was where it was supposed to be, and everything was attached to each other. Dr [REDACTED] told me she believed all of this damage was due to the caesarean.

Birth 2: [REDACTED] 2018

As my first birth ended in a caesarean I was limited in the choices for my birthing with my second child. I tried to find a private midwife initially but found there was actually none in Canberra. Only one private midwife in a surrounding regional areas provided private midwifery services with admission rights to TCH but was unsuitable due to travel and costs. I decided to go back to TCH in order to attempt a VBAC (Vaginal Birth After Caesarean) within a continuity of care program. I applied for the CATCH program. An extensive referral was sent outlining my first birth and the physical and mental trauma sustained from it. This was followed up by several phone calls from myself.

Towards the end of the first trimester I received a call from [REDACTED], midwife at TCH, advising I was going to be placed in her case load. [REDACTED] and I met several times throughout my second pregnancy. [REDACTED] provided my pregnancy care wherever possible. I had a direct mobile number to contact her and she even offered to come to my house for antenatal appointments. She was aware of my trauma history and went out of her way to make me feel informed and safe.

At 20 weeks I had an obstetrician appointment at TCH. This triggered my PTSD and I became very distressed. Due to this [REDACTED] organised a meeting with a Perinatal and Infant Mental Health Coordinator from Queanbeyan Hospital to advise on how to best care for me under the circumstances and how to carry out trauma informed practices. This person made several recommendations which were included in my birth plan.

[REDACTED] went on leave over my estimated due date. I was assigned another midwife from the CATCH team named [REDACTED]. I went in to labour at 40 weeks exactly and was admitted to hospital at 40+1. When I arrived, I was in a lot of pain and extremely distressed. It was about [REDACTED], we parked immediately out the front and I had to buzz to be let in. We had called [REDACTED] before leaving the house and had arrange to meet her at TCH.

I was distressed and disorientated and couldn't find my way to birth centre and ended up wandering around screaming on the wrong floor. My husband phoned [REDACTED] and she gave him directions to the birth centre. [REDACTED] asked me to lay down on the bed for an examination. I said I couldn't get on my back because I was in too much pain. She told me I had to be examined. My waters burst on the floor of the birth centre. I laid on the bed to be examined, screaming in pain, the midwife performed a vaginal examination and I was told I was 9.5cm dilated. [REDACTED] called for a wheel chair. I told her I couldn't sit down it hurt too much. She told me I had to because if I kept walking I would have the baby and I wasn't allowed to have the baby in the birth centre.

I was taken via wheelchair through the main birth suite doors (contrary to prescribed trauma plan). I was taken in to the suite I had my daughter in in 2015 (contrary to prescribed trauma plan). I told the staff I wouldn't go in that room and I tried to get out of the wheelchair. They kept moving me in the chair and told me I didn't have a choice as no other rooms were available. The birth centre was empty.

None of the plans surrounding my wishes or my trauma management were respected. Against my consent I was attached to wired monitoring and told to get on the bed. I kept trying to get off the bed, and kept getting told to get back on it. I had previously agreed to a cannula but it was not to be placed in my hand. Staff placed the cannula in my hand while I wasn't looking.

At some point my privately employed doula arrived. She had been locked out of the ward and had difficulty accessing the birth suite. I asked for gas for the pain and was given this. I asked for water as pain relief and was told I could not access this due to no bath in the room and wired monitoring. It was clear on my birth plan that being able to move freely and access to water was important pain management strategy for me.

The midwife wasn't happy with the wired monitoring. I had only agreed to continuous monitoring provided it was wireless, I made this very clear at my antenatal appointments as movement was very important to me. She said she wanted to put a scalp clip on the baby's head. I said no. She kept pushing. It specifically said on my birth plan, which she had a copy of, that I wouldn't consent to a scalp clip. I told her my daughter had one and I didn't like them. The midwife kept asking why I wouldn't agree to a scalp clip. After trying to argue in the throes of labour I began to just ignore her questions.

The midwife kept making negative comments such as

"This isn't working"

"babies don't like to be in there too long"

"This is taking too long"

"I can see he wants to come out and you're stopping this from happening"

"what are you scared or something?"

These comments made me scared. I asked her what was wrong. She said she didn't know and to get on my back so she could have a look. I said I couldn't it hurt too much. She said I didn't have a choice. I got on my back and she performed a vaginal examination.

My husband, my doula, and myself all thought that something was wrong. My husband told me I needed to get the baby out now. After only 30 minutes of pushing I pushed my son out vaginally. You could tell from the indent on his head he hadn't yet reached optimal position as the cone shape was to one side. I was so scared and in such a rush to push him out I didn't wait for him to turn his shoulders. This resulted in first degree tearing and several grazes. The grazes became ulcerated and infected and would go on to take 2 months to heal.

I was handed my son and I laid on the bed with him. The cord was cut and I was given an injection to help birth the placenta. The midwife tried pulling on the cord and it didn't work. She started to poke my tummy. I winced in pain and told her to stop, she's hurting me. She said she had to do it. I said if she had to hurt me then I would like some pain relief. She said there's nothing she can give me to help and continued to poke my stomach. A doctor came to check on my placenta. The midwife told me to get and go to the toilet. I went to the toilet and was unable to birth the placenta. The midwife said I would have to go to theatre if it didn't come out. I was in a lot of pain as my body had just gone in to one long contraction in an effort to remove the placenta. I had some more gas and pushed the placenta out. The midwife laughed and said "All I have to do to get you to do what I want is threaten intervention." This comment made me feel horrified and violated.

I said I wanted to leave the room as I was uncomfortable being in the room where I laboured with my daughter. The midwife told me there were not postnatal rooms available and to have a shower and I could go home straight from the birth suite. I had a shower and when I finished was told the room was needed so I would need to walk to the birth centre. I made it only a few meters up the hall before I started feeling dizzy and faint. Someone asked if I was ok. I said I didn't think so I needed to sit down. They got me a wheelchair and moved me upstairs to the birth centre. I was told that my pulse and blood pressure were not satisfactory and I would have to stay a couple of hours until I got cleared to leave. I asked if we could have a pillow and a blanket and was told no, there were none available as it was a birthing suite.

A doctor came to see me around lunch time and said my blood pressure and pulse were still too high. I was told I could leave if I felt I could walk to the car. I advised that I did not feel I could walk to the car. At some point I buzzed the nurses and asked if I could have some food and pain relief. I asked for pain relief and food. Staff gave me Panadol and told me there was no vegetarian food available. They said I had a meat dish put aside for me but they thought there was a spare pastry around that might be vegetarian but they weren't really sure what was in it. We again asked for bedding and were given a single pillow and blanket.

The doctor came around again about 5pm. They said my pulse and blood pressure was still not satisfactory but I could leave if I wanted to. I was cold, hungry and in a lot of pain. I opted to leave and was taken to the car in a wheelchair by my husband at around 5pm, around 12 hours after being admitted and 10.5 hours after giving birth. My husband knew I was vulnerable and scared and had stayed by my side the entire time. We had received another parking fine during our stay at the hospital.

The midwives from the CATCH program came to see me at my house in the following days. I saw [REDACTED] again and she told me that the only reason I had tearing and grazing was because I pushed my son out so quickly. I was confused as the things she said in labour made us feel like it was taking too long and we were in danger. She said she apologised for her language and all she meant was I should change position. This comment stunned both my husband, my doula and I as the language was making everyone very fearful.

I was very happy with the antenatal care I received and felt very safe and confident within the CATCH, continuity of care program. However, I was disappointed with the labour, birth and postnatal care at TCH.

To summarise the important points to note from my story;

- TCH are not always complying with the Australian Medical Associations, Maternal Decision Making Guidelines, nor the Law.
- TCH routinely does not have the space, resources or staff to adequately care for women and babies.
- Women and children are being forced out of the hospital before it is medically appropriate.
- The Birth Centre Suites should be utilised more, I should have been able to use them as a low risk VBAC.
- Antenatal care, particularly continuity of care by a midwife is important. Ideally this should be available to all women.
- Women in pregnancy and labour and being forced in to procedures and examinations without consent, and at times without appropriate medical justification.
- Caesareans are being performed without consent, and with the use of manipulation, coercion and force.
- Birth plans are not being respected.
- Postnatal facilities are inadequate.
- Better parking facilities are needed.
- Better pain management is needed.
- Dietary requirements of admitted patients are not being met.
- Trauma informed practices and recommendations are not being adhered to.