



# Maternity Services

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*A story from local Healesville Mother Angela McSweeney*

Healesville Hospital was not an option for me to deliver my first child due to their restrictions and subsequently could not be an option for my second child due to the interventions that occurred in my first birth.

Irrespective of Eastern Health's restrictions concerning who could birth at Healesville Hospital, I made a very conscious and responsible decision not to give birth at Healesville Hospital due to the limited services it could offer. In the event of a medical emergency, I did not want to put my life or my baby's life at risk during the drive to another hospital. According to Alan Lily, over 50% of birthing mothers were required to be transferred during labour to a different hospital. HOWEVER, this fact and the responsible decision I made regarding my births, should in no manner be used as an excuse to rid Healesville Hospital of its maternity unit but instead be used as motivation to increase the equipment and capabilities of the unit. Eastern Health cannot use their 'fact' that 94% of women from Healesville chose to give birth elsewhere. Women WANT to birth here!! The choice was pre-made for these women either because of Eastern Health's restrictions or due to the fact that women were making a responsible decision. Women DO NOT want to have to travel 45 minutes or longer for every one of their midwife appointments; and they DEFINITELY do not want to endure this same drive while in labour. I don't think we need to even discuss the dangers that this puts not only the labouring woman and baby in, but also the driver and other motorists on the road as well.

Women at any point in their labour do not want to travel any distance to a hospital only to be turned away because they are not yet in 'true' labour; which happened to me with the birth of my first child. I had random contractions which lasted 5 days before she was born during which I had to keep travelling to and from Box Hill - this was not me 'over-reacting' and continuously deciding to go to the hospital. In fact, I was quite happy to do most of the labouring at home; but the hospital, rightly so, wanted to monitor myself and the baby on a daily basis. I'm not saying that this was not required, but I would have much preferred to make the 3 minute drive to Healesville Hospital instead. And I'm positive that I don't need to go into detail how labour actually slows down and contractions become even more erratic once a mother sits immobile for a period of time.

It was not until the evening of that 5th day of random contractions did the obstetrician advise me that the best method of action for my labour was cyntocin and an epidural due to the fact that my daughter was posterior. She said that she saw women enter active labour being as tired as I was and suggested that I needed to rest before I was required to push; to which I agreed. The midwives and obstetrician, despite being fully aware of the exhaustion that I was already under and subsequent exhaustion that followed once my daughter was born coupled with the lack of colostrum and the difficulty my daughter had attaching while trying to breastfeed, still sent me home after 36 hours from the time of birth. Had I known that I was able to recover at Healesville Hospital, I may have not suffered 3 months of near post natal depression. My anxiety and stress levels inhibited me from sleeping, eating, and producing an adequate milk supply during the first few weeks of her life. I feared my daughter. I was unable to connect to her; to love her as I should have. On a daily basis I shed many tears, and questioned my ability as a woman and a mother.

If it were not for the two full day lactation sessions that I attended with a Dom midwife from Healesville Hospital, I would have not been able to breastfeed and would have only added to the already high percentage of mothers in Healesville who do not breastfeed their babies.

When I became pregnant with my second child, I was determined to be in more control of his birth. I wanted to create a 'home birth experience' in a safe setting. Again, not choosing Healesville Hospital due to the reasons that I have previously mentioned, I chose the Family Birth Centre at the Angliss. Regardless I would have not been permitted to birth at Healesville Hospital due to the interventions that were required during my first birth. Despite knowing that I would have to travel to Ferntree Gully for all of my appointments and birth, I was very impressed with the midwives holistic and natural approach to pregnancy and birth.

My plan was to have my post-birth recovery at Healesville Hospital so as to avoid the negative experiences I suffered with my first child.

It was a heart-breaking blow towards the end of my pregnancy to find out that Eastern Health closed the maternity unit at Healesville Hospital.

Then I found out that the Family Birth Centre could possibly be closed when I arrived in labour due to Eastern Health's hiring freeze drove me to a slight panic. I decided to employ a doula for my birth to help ensure a holistic and positive birth experience. This decision costed my already low income family approximately \$1500.

Labour for my second child, began in the same way as my first child with random contractions due to him sitting posterior. Luckily the doula assisted in engaging my son properly and in a matter of 15 minutes while labouring at home, my contractions progressed from 5 minutes apart and bearable to 2 minutes and absolutely excruciating...then we had to make the drive to the hospital which on a good day takes at least 45 minutes. No one can possibly explain the pain of labour, and regardless it differs from woman to woman. I always believed myself to be a strong, extremely focused and competent woman - but trying to endure one minute contractions which came every two minutes while being cramped in the back of a car was not only agonizing but extremely dangerous since I was unable to wear a seatbelt. Not only was I trying to deal with physical pain, my anxiety and stress level began to intensify when I began to feel the desire to push and struggled to keep the thought out of my mind that I may deliver my baby in the car or on the side of the road without medical assistance besides my doula. One does not need to go into detail the stress and danger my partner was placed under having driven me the 45 minutes to the Angliss. Further, one does not need to go into detail the danger other motorists are put in when any birthing mother is driven to a hospital; however this threat is grossly diminished if the drive is much shorter - say the 3 minutes it would have taken for us to arrive at Healesville Hospital. There is no doubt in my mind that I would have had a more successful labour with my second child if I were able to delivery at Healesville Hospital. I was not able to find optimal birthing positions while in the car and by the time we arrived at the Angliss, my body was so cramped that I was unable to gain any type of control and was completely a slave to the pain my body was experiencing.

During the Healesville town meeting, Alan Lily of Eastern Health continued to state that Healesville Hospital would employ models of care that were utilized at other hospitals. In my profession as a primary teacher, I am told that there is no need to 'reinvent the wheel', however, without reinvention where can there be progress? Eastern Health has the opportunity to create a new model of care with regards to maternity services at Healesville Hospital. Why not use this facility and the committed staff and be an innovator of progress. Develop a new model of care that can inspire other medical centres. Alan Lily mentioned that Healesville Hospital would employ the highly beneficial 'know your midwife' program. I question however if there will be a space for every expecting mother in Healesville and the surrounding areas to use this program. Coupled with the introduction of this program, Mr Lily stated that Healesville Hospital would become a teaching centre for midwifery. Another question is then raised - how can Healesville Hospital teach midwifery if the maternity services have been taken away? Mr Lily further stated that in order to teach students about labour, simulated births would be conducted. I have never heard of anything so ridiculous in my life. What in heaven's name is a simulated birth? Do you simply instruct someone to yell while throwing a bucket of water on the floor? And who might I add would play the role of the birthing mother in these simulated births? I would invite the board members who sit before us or anyone with decision making authority in Eastern Health to strap on a device which simulates labour contractions and experience the excruciating pain of childbirth for a couple of hours. Then cramp yourself in the back of a vehicle, rev up the contractions and make the drive to the nearest hospital in peak hour traffic.

Only then will you have the slightest understanding of why Healesville Hospital's maternity services are vital to the women of this community.

If Eastern Health did not deem it financially feasible to return full maternity services to Healesville Hospital, I would like to suggest that women of Healesville and the surrounding community, and once discharged from another hospital could return to Healesville for post-birth recovery. If so, this would free up beds at other hospitals, it would make it easier for husbands and families to visit and support the new mother; and the midwives here could spend time with each woman to ensure that she succeeded as best she could when she did return home. This would also simply put mothers in touch with other new mothers in the area. The YVCH Mums Day Out Program saw me connected to 11 new mums with a fantastic education and personal support program.

Some important facts to remember, Healesville has one of the highest teen pregnancy rates, and 5.9% of households in Healesville are without at least one car.