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Respectful Care | Stillbirths

Creating time and space to grow parenthood

A post from the Stillbirth Advocacy Working Group stillbirth series by Dorte Hvidtjørn.

At Aarhus University Hospital, in Aarhus, Denmark, there is a small shielded special space for bereaved parents and their babies who have died: the Unit for Perinatal Loss. I have worked there as a midwife for 10 years and I would like to share some of my experiences with you.

The Unit for Perinatal Loss has existed since 2011, and more than 800 couples have been admitted. Over 10 years of practice has generated a lot of experience in supporting bereaved parents among the seven midwives working at the unit; and a lot of respect for the human capability to endure devastation.

Denmark has a tax-financed, free-of-charge health care system, and comprehensive midwifery and obstetric care is available to all women. Thus, admission to the Unit for Perinatal Loss is also free of charge.

As midwives at the unit, we take care of the parents during induction of labor, birth and in the days after. We seek to create a homelike atmosphere with curtains, plants, television, pictures from nature, and windows facing a garden. Each mother and her partner have their own space with a double bed. Parents are allowed to stay as long as they need, some



Credit: Anne Damgaard

staying for up to a week, and parents decide how much time they want to spend with their baby who has died, and when they want to be with him or her.(1) Families and friends are encouraged to visit and meet the baby.

In many ways, the first days after the baby is born are quite comparable to the first days after the birth of a liveborn baby. The baby is admired, resemblance to family members is discussed, grandparents visit to see and hold the newborn, pictures are taken, and the baby may be given a bath and dressed in a carefully chosen outfit. At night-time, the parents may sing a lullaby, and the baby may be placed between them in the double bed for the night.

“I’VE BEEN SO HAPPY AND PROUD. ESPECIALLY WHEN WE WERE TOGETHER WITH HER. MORE PROUD THAN UNHAPPY. I FEARED IT SO MUCH BEFOREHAND, BUT WHEN SHE WAS BORN – IT WAS THE BEST MOMENT OF MY LIFE.” – FATHER OF A STILLBORN GIRL

The ways parents are together with their stillborn babies in the unit are very different from the usual contact with other deceased relatives, where the handling of dead bodies is to a large degree handed over to professionals such as nurses, doctors, and morticians. For outsiders, the physical attachment to the dead baby may seem odd or even bizarre, and often the parents must explain and defend their actions. But the togetherness has a deeper meaning.



Credit: Anne Damgaard

Birth and death are the two greatest transitions in human life. During transitions, we need rituals to help us through. When birth and death are woven together as is the case with stillbirth, rituals are even more important. We at the Unit for Perinatal Loss see all these loving and caring parental actions as crucial rituals with important outcomes: they both help the parents to acknowledge the death of their baby, whilst also confirming their parenthood.(2)

Often people ask us, “How can you go on working at this Unit for Perinatal Loss where you see so much grief and tragedy?” And this is true; we do see and sense the pain and devastation. But even more so, we experience the boundless love and the parental pride. Witnessing a loving parenthood unfold is a privilege.

This post from the Stillbirth Advocacy Working Group (SAWG) reflects the perspective of the author alone; it does not represent the views of the SAWG. The Stillbirth Advocacy Working Group was founded by the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, and is co-chaired by the International Stillbirth

Alliance and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. Email co-chairs Hannah Blencowe or Susannah Leisher at hannah-jayne.blencowe@lshtm.ac.uk or shleisher@aol.com to learn more.

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