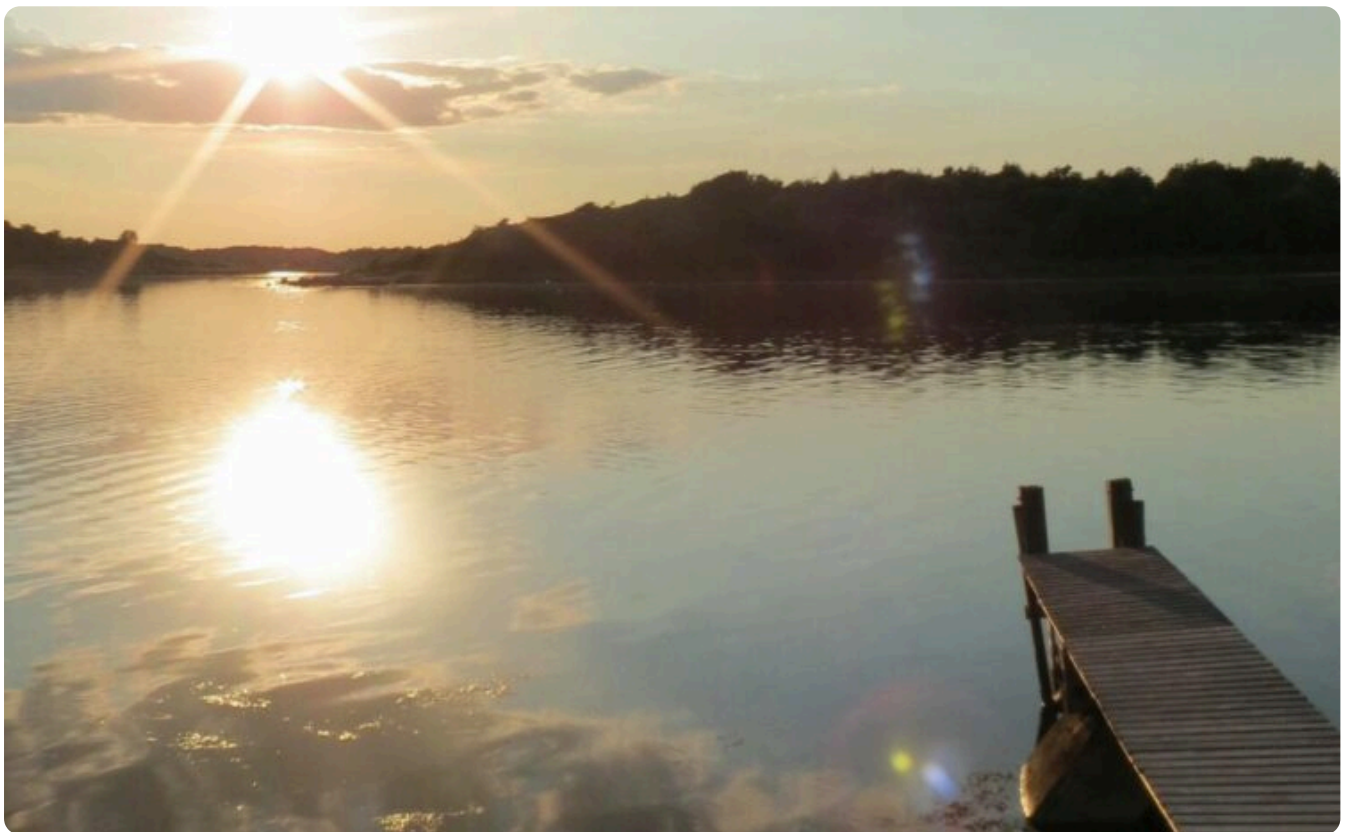




Feb 18, 2020

Stillbirths

Stillbirth in the Swedish context



A post from the Stillbirth Advocacy Working Group stillbirths series by Sofia Säterskog

My son was born dead.

It was a warm summer's day in Stockholm, July 2013. We were expecting our first baby and naming him August. We had celebrated Swedish Midsummer and were now just waiting for his arrival. One

day in week 41 of my pregnancy, I felt something was different. I had not felt August kick and neither had I felt him move in me. Hours later, a midwife told me that my baby no longer had a heartbeat. I did not understand what she had said. What did she try to tell me?

How could my baby boy have died in one of the best health care systems in the world? I was in shock. The doctor told me that “this happens often, at this hospital every other week”. Thoughts were swirling in my head. Why hadn’t I been made aware of that statistic?

August was born 54 cm long and weighed 3960 grams. The doctor explained to me that “we don’t know why babies die sometimes and for August this seems to be unexplainable”.

I was met with Swedish silence. Sweden has a generous welfare state with free schools and public health care for all. It is a fantastic system and has contributed to strong social and economic development since the 19th century.

However, the welfare state has also changed the norms of integrity and social behavior. In a society where everyone expects the state to provide a helping hand in times of crises, many people are unsure of what to say and how to act when others face grief and tragedy.

When August died and I needed support from friends and colleagues, it was quiet. Silent. No one wanted to talk about a dead and buried baby.

No decrease in the stillbirth rate in decades. Although there has been fantastic development within the health care system and progress made for medical treatment, the number of stillbirths has not decreased in Sweden for decades[i]. The stillbirth rates in other European countries are lower in comparison to Sweden[ii].

Stillborn babies are invisible, both in priority and in statistics. However, there has been slow, positive change in attitudes and knowledge. In December 2019, the Swedish Minister of Social Affairs, Lena Hallengren, mentioned stillbirth[iii]. It was the very first time a government member has shown public willingness to act to reduce the numbers of deaths.

I got through the first period of grief. It took time. I got used to the Swedish silence around me. My hope and help forward was through meeting with other parents. Sharing our experience and supporting each other was crucial for me to get through the first few years following August’s death. I didn’t know anything about the other parents, but we had all experienced burying our small children. Today, six years after August’s death, I visualize him when looking at his two younger siblings, Gustav and Edith.

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.blencowe@lshtm.ac.uk or shleisher@aol.com to learn more.

This post from a member of the Stillbirth Advocacy Working Group (SAWG) reflects the perspective of the author alone; it does not represent the views of the SAWG.

References

[i] The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare's Medical Register

[ii] The Lancet Series 2016, Ending preventable stillbirths 4, “Stillbirths: recall to action in high-income countries”

[iii] <https://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=83&artikel=7371853>

<https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/dalarna/farre-barn-ska-do-under-graviditeten-nytt-kunskapsstod-pa-gang>

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