

The Impact of Respectful and Compassionate Bereavement Care Following Stillbirth

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The devastation and grief felt by parents when their baby dies is life-long, and can have a huge impact in all aspects of their life. The life they may have planned and imaged with their baby and as a family disappears and while good bereavement care cannot take away the pain it can help parents' wellbeing both immediately after their baby dies and into the longer term.

The past few years have seen considerable improvements in the provision of high-quality bereavement care for parents and families. However, the delivery and availability of this improvement is inconsistent. Delivery of good bereavement care needs well-trained staff and consideration of the physical environment in which the care is given. This relies on services and facilities being adequately resourced and staff having the time and opportunity to access the right training and support.

This study surveyed parents who self-identified as being bereaved by stillbirth. Parents were asked about their experience of factors that are associated with respectful care (Small et al.). Shockingly, one in four parents reported disrespectful care. The findings further highlight some of the disparities that exist globally; parents from middle-income countries, babies born at earlier gestations and first-time mothers were most likely to report disrespectful care.

The study found some key components of respectful bereavement care, such as memory making, were not being delivered, and that communication was at times rushed and difficult for parents to understand. Parents often tell us that they replay the detail of what happened around the time of their baby's death and these memories are intertwined with those of their baby. It is vital that staff can communicate sensitively with parents, using language they understand and mirroring parents' preferences without rushing (Sensitive and effective communication | Sands - Stillbirth and neonatal death charity, n.d.).

Often the only time parents bereaved by stillbirth will have with their baby is when they are receiving bereavement care but if there is little evidence of the time spent together parents can find it difficult to develop a meaningful relationship with their baby. Supporting parents to make memories and keep a record of this time, for example by taking photographs and hand and footprints, can help parents forge an enduring bond and connection with their baby after they have to say goodbye (Memory box | Sands - Stillbirth and

neonatal death charity, n.d.). Activities such as washing and dressing their baby can provide parenting opportunities recognising their role as the baby’s parents.

Respectful and compassionate bereavement care can make an immense difference to parents’ lives and futures. Accessing good quality care should not be determined by factors such as geography, the baby’s gestation, or parents’ socioeconomic status. Knowing the difference good care can make to a parent’s life course should be a priority for service providers and governments.