

Commentary: We need to be aware of the consequences of errors

Now and then Sands hears from parents or healthcare staff about mistakes in identifying the sex of very premature or macerated babies. The consequences of these unintended errors can be far-reaching and profound.

Some years ago, a mother gave birth to very premature twins, who lived for a very short while. They were identified as boys, given boys' names and christened. Their treasured photos were kept in frames threaded with blue ribbons. The babies' births, deaths and names were registered at the local register office.

Weeks later, when discussing the post-mortem results, a locum consultant casually mentioned that they had been identified as girls, without appreciating that this was profoundly shocking news to the mother.

Her grief was not just renewed, it was intensified. She said that she felt she was now grieving for four babies, not just two. She struggled to get the babies' names changed in the register and eventually had to travel over 100 miles to the Chief Registrar in London. Even then the only way she could get the register

altered was under the heading of 'sex change'. Not surprisingly she found this additionally distressing. Four years later, she was still trying to come to terms with the consequences of this mistake. She gave me permission to tell her story as she is desperate to ensure that no other parent suffers as she has.

Uncertainty is always hard to bear and is especially difficult when parents' expectations have been dashed and their lives have spiralled out of control. If there could be the slightest doubt about the sex of the baby it is far better for staff to be cautious, to prepare the parents for this possibility and once the baby is born, gently tell the parents what their choices are.

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