



Sands briefing: Baby Loss Awareness Week 2016

Sands is the leading stillbirth and neonatal death charity in the UK. We work nationally to reduce baby deaths through promoting better maternity care and funding research. We have a programme of training and a wide range of resources designed to support professionals to improve the bereavement care they provide following the death of a baby, and we provide a comprehensive bereavement support service both nationally through our helpline and locally through around 100 regional support groups based across the UK.

Preventing babies' deaths

In 2014, around 15 babies per day died either before, during or shortly after birth in the UK.

The poorest women and women with a Black or Asian ethnic background continue to have an increased risk that their baby will die. There also continues to be stark variation in Trust and Health Board rates – even when adjusted for differences in population risk - across the UK, from 4.9 to 7.1 deaths per 1,000 births.

In late 2015, Jeremy Hunt, Secretary of State for Health, announced a new national ambition to halve the rate of stillbirths, neonatal deaths, brain injuries and maternal deaths in England by 2030, with an interim reduction of 20% by 2020.

Much more needs to be done if the UK is to meet this ambition. The Netherlands, for example, has reduced its stillbirth rate by 6.8% every year since 2000, whereas the UK's rate has fallen by only 1.4% per year over the same period.

Research by MBRRACE-UK published in November 2015 showed that 60% of term stillbirths in the UK could potentially be prevented simply by applying the minimum standards of antenatal care and guidance for mothers and babies. One in three stillbirths happen at term, a time when they are likely to have survived outside the womb had they been safely delivered earlier.

The government has yet to demonstrate how it intends to achieve a significant fall in the number of babies dying. A clear, well-funded strategy, that includes a range of approaches from investment in research funding to improvements in care, is urgently needed if the UK's rates are to fall and the persisting inequalities are to be eradicated.

Improving bereavement care

Bereavement care continues to be under resourced, with an equally uneven provision of care across the UK.

Research by Sands over summer 2016 has revealed that resources for bereavement care in maternity units continues to be insufficient to meet demand in some areas. Of the Trusts and Health Boards that responded to a survey, 38% of the maternity units they cover do not have a specialist bereavement midwife based at them.

Bereavement care training is mandatory in only 46% of Trusts and Health Boards. Where this training is mandatory, two thirds carry out training annually, and of those, 86% allocate only an hour or less for training. This is not enough to ensure that health professionals are sufficiently prepared to handle the complexities of caring for bereaved families.

There are also still gaps in the provision of adequate facilities to care for bereaved parents. Whilst two thirds of Trusts and Health Boards have a dedicated bereavement room in each maternity unit they cover, one in ten still have no dedicated bereavement rooms.

The care that bereaved parents receive in hospital following the death of their baby is crucial. These experiences may be remembered by parents for the rest of their lives, and bad experiences are likely to exacerbate feelings of pain and grief for bereaved parents, potentially for many years to come. Small details can mean a great deal to recently bereaved parents, and the environment in which care is delivered is of particular importance. This is why dedicated bereavement care rooms and suites are a necessity to ensure that parents receive care that best suits their needs.

The role of the bereavement midwife in delivering good bereavement care, ensuring continuity of care and carer, ensuring adequate training for colleagues and providing practical and emotional support in the immediate and long term is absolutely crucial to parents' wellbeing.

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