

Best Practice

Evidence-based guidance for healthcare professionals

Caring for families experiencing stillbirth

Part 2 of 3: The birth

Evidence-based guidance for healthcare professionals providing care for parents immediately after birth

Introduction

This document has been derived from a systematic review of the available evidence regarding the nature of meaningful and/or appropriate non-pharmacological, psychosocial supportive care for families to improve their psychological well-being following stillbirth.¹

This document provides evidence-based guidance for healthcare professionals providing care for parents during and immediately after birth. There are a number of critical factors centred around ensuring that parents are sensitively and supportively informed and prepared to make decisions about seeing and holding their baby. If parents do decide to see their baby, healthcare professionals can provide valuable advice and guidance to support parents in deciding how they would like to spend time with their baby, what they might like to do and especially if they would like to collect any mementos. Sensitivity, empathy, validation of parents' emotions, provision of clear, understandable information and consideration of the timing of this information are still important at this point in the care pathway.

Further information in this 3-part series about caring for families experiencing stillbirth can be found in 'Part 1: Diagnosis to birth' and 'Part 3: Care following birth'.

Implications for practice

The implications for practice listed below are based on the best available evidence. They are derived directly from the synthesised information contained in the systematic review of evidence as well as from expert and consumer representative advice. The implications for practice are intended as a guide to inform healthcare professionals' clinical decision-making in conjunction with their unique context, the preference of their patient and their own expert clinical judgement.

During and immediately after birth

Information about the baby

- Parents may wish to have information about what their baby is likely to look like when it is born in order to prepare themselves for seeing the baby. This may include what the baby will look like in terms of gestational age and development, known physical abnormalities as well as potential injuries such as peeling skin, for example. Confronting descriptions may distress parents and impact on their decisions around seeing their baby, so providing speculative information may not be appropriate.

Seeing and holding

- Parents may make more appropriate personal decisions if healthcare professionals provide information about how other parents have chosen to make contact with their stillborn babies and how seeing their baby may affirm the baby's existence, parental identity and create valuable memories.
- Parents appreciate gentle, individualised guidance when deciding on seeing their baby that acknowledges the parents' natural desire to see and hold their baby after birth.
- Parents may decline to see or hold their baby, especially at first. Closed-ended questions such as 'do you want to see your baby?' may inadvertently 'guide' parents to decline. Open-ended questions may be more suitable, for example asking parents when or how they would like to see their baby. Parents may appreciate being informed that they can change their minds any time.
- Parents appreciate when healthcare professionals consider and enquire about their wishes and feelings both individually and as a couple.
- Parents appreciate it when their decisions regarding seeing and holding their baby are respected and supported by healthcare professionals. Parents who do decline to see or hold their baby may still appreciate healthcare professionals engaging them in sensitive conversation about their baby and their experience.
- Parents may appreciate being made aware that they will be supported to spend as much time as they want with their baby and being offered the option to take their baby home or to see and spend time with their baby on more than one occasion.
- Parents have different preferences for when and how much time they would like to spend with their baby and may appreciate healthcare professionals discussing the possibilities with them and what they would prefer.

Emotional support

Both parents need emotional support. Parents prefer any communication and interaction with healthcare professionals to be conducted with sensitivity, compassion and empathy. Respect for the situation, and parents' emotions and reactions, is important. Parents appreciate it when healthcare professionals validate and affirm their feelings as natural and understandable, whatever they may be. It is important that parents feel that their role as parents is understood by healthcare professionals.

It is also important to recognise that an entire family is affected by stillbirth. This can be especially true for older siblings and grandparents who also require emotional support and attention.

Part 2 of 3: The birth

- Information about what might physically happen to the baby over time, such as nose bleeds, for example, may be helpful for parents who want to spend time with their baby.
- Parents may not know how to behave or what to do with their baby and appreciate when healthcare professionals help them with suggestions and guidance. Parents can be encouraged and supported to bathe, dress and engage in other parenting activities with their baby and appreciate when healthcare professionals accept these activities as normal.
- For many parents, no length of time is 'long enough' and parents appreciate healthcare professionals' understanding that parting with their baby may be extremely distressing.

Respect for the baby

- Parents appreciate when healthcare professionals speak about, touch and hold their baby with the same tenderness and respect afforded to any baby. This may involve cuddling and speaking softly to the baby; such activities may normalise spending time with their baby and validate the parents' feelings.

Other family members

- Parents appreciate receiving information and guidance around involving family members and loved ones- in seeing and holding their baby. Having this information prior to birth may be valuable for parents so they are able to plan accordingly.

Collecting and storing mementos

- Many parents appreciate healthcare professionals' support and encouragement in collecting tangible mementos.
- Parents may not spontaneously think of collecting mementos themselves and appreciate when healthcare professionals inform them that it is okay and provide suggestions regarding what they might like to keep.
- Items may include photographs, ultrasound images, locks of hair, blankets, items of clothing, and hand and foot prints. For some items, such as ultrasound images, parents may need special information regarding safe storage and preservation.
- Parents, including those who have decided not to see or hold their baby, may still appreciate tangible mementos being collected and stored on their behalf by the hospital.

Implications for practice relevant throughout the stillbirth experience

The implications for practice listed below relate to each phase of the stillbirth experience, including at and immediately following birth.

Sensitive, genuine and empathetic care

- Parents who experience stillbirth are often emotionally fragile and appreciate healthcare professionals' empathy and support from the time when they suspect that something is wrong with their pregnancy to thenceforth, even for many years after the immediate experience.
- If possible, parents may appreciate when healthcare professionals give them the option to have friends or family members present to provide support.

Information provision

Parents are rarely prepared for the experience of stillbirth and information provision is critical.

Any information – verbal, electronic and written – is appreciated when provided in clear, understandable language and in a step-by-step manner so that parents can prepare and take in the information.

Healthcare professionals can take cues from parents, their families and companions to help identify the most appropriate times to provide honest and sensitive information and guidance. Referrals to where parents and families can access additional information of support can also be very helpful.

It is important for parents that they are both provided with information. Failure to provide information to partners can lead to feelings of ostracism, blame and isolation.

Parents appreciate it when they are consulted by healthcare professionals to establish their preferences and desires. Involvement and collaboration in decision making and having time to ask questions are also important for parents.

Upon discharge from hospital, it is important to ensure that parents are provided with information to take home.

Part 2 of 3: The birth

- Parents may appreciate it when healthcare professionals engage with them genuinely and provide individualised and personal care.
- Parents may appreciate it when healthcare professionals show emotion and empathy towards their experience.
- Parents experience stillbirth as the death of their baby rather than as a medical event. Over-medicalisation of the event by healthcare professionals may cause unnecessary distress.
- Parents appreciate it when healthcare professionals respect and validate their emotional experience and reactions of being parents of baby that has died shortly before or during birth.

Information provision and communication

- Parents may be distressed by healthcare professionals who appear disengaged or do not take time to provide information, support and empathetic care.
- Parents should be provided with honest, forthcoming and step-by-step information in advance of each event and procedure.
- Dismissive, blunt, cold or inconsiderately worded communication will distress parents.
- Even small comforting gestures and simple words of sympathy and reassurance can help parents feel supported.
- Parents may wish to understand the cause of their baby's death. Verbal, electronic and written information may be helpful for parents to help them decide whether they would like investigations performed or post-mortem examinations conducted.

Support and training for healthcare professionals

- Healthcare professionals who attend to parents of stillborn babies may be better able to provide meaningful and appropriate care if they are provided with training and support to develop their knowledge and skills to perform their role as well as to cope with their own emotional reactions.

Culturally appropriate care

These implications for practice around culturally appropriate care were derived from the perspectives of a limited number of cultural groups only. With consultation with the expert advisory group,[†] these implications however may be appropriate and relevant for people from diverse cultural backgrounds as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Healthcare professionals must be aware that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to providing culturally appropriate care.

- Parents appreciate healthcare professionals who acknowledge, are aware and inclusive of spiritual, religious and cultural beliefs that may be different from their own. For example, parents may have particular needs such as speaking to their baby in their own language or performing important cultural, spiritual or religious rituals while in the healthcare setting.
- Some cultural groups have particular beliefs and practices around death which may impact on their preferences for care. Parents appreciate healthcare professionals being aware of and considering these when providing care.

Environment

Parents may have different preferences for where they would like to be located within the hospital. Some parents may be distressed by being located in the proximity of other parents and their babies and may desire a private room if one is available. Parents may not wish to be located outside the maternity ward, which can be isolating and distressing if staff are unaware of their situation.

Communication between staff on the parents' situation before parents are moved to other areas is likely to be appreciated, avoiding the necessity for parents to repeat their story multiple times to different hospital staff which is often distressing.

Healthcare professionals should be aware that it is important to respect parents' privacy when talking about their situation with other healthcare professionals in public areas of the hospital. This can be especially important in hospitals in small communities.

Parents appreciate being consulted regarding their preferences around where they are located. It is also necessary to consider the mother's clinical presentation when making decisions regarding the parents' location within the hospital and when discussing hospital discharge arrangements.

Part 2 of 3: The birth

- Parents may have individual preferences for care that do not necessarily match more general preferences of their cultural, spiritual or religious group. Healthcare professionals must ensure that parents' individual preferences are heard and acknowledged rather than assuming they will want the same care as other parents with a similar background.
- Parents appreciate healthcare professionals' assistance to contact their preferred spiritual, religious and/or cultural support and services while in hospital.
- Lack of respect and acknowledgement of parents' cultural heritage and beliefs can result in parents losing trust in the healthcare service.
- Healthcare professionals attending to parents of stillborn babies may be better able to provide culturally appropriate care if they are provided with training and support to develop their knowledge and skills to acknowledge and understand different cultural groups' needs and preferences for care.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may wish to have family members, elders and/or community leaders there to support them through their experience.
- Healthcare professionals may be able to contact specialist services such as Aboriginal healthcare workers and Aboriginal and Maternal Infant Care (AMIC) workers from outside their local healthcare service and area for information and advice when caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Healthcare professionals attending to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware of and acknowledge that kinship and family structure is of particular cultural significance. Parents may want family members and/or elders to be there for them to provide support.
- For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, mothers assign the 'birth order' to their children. Understanding that a stillborn baby may have a particular place in this birth order and for example may be the mothers' 'firstborn' is important.

Background

At the time of birth parents experiencing stillbirth require supportive and sensitive care from healthcare professionals. Parents are often unprepared for the experience of stillbirth and may benefit from information to help them make important decisions regarding seeing, holding and spending time with their baby. Parents who experience stillbirth are at risk of detrimental psychosocial effects including grief, depression and self-blame. Parents may also experience culture-related impact following stillbirth, for example in relation to their system of kinship and how they relate to their immediate family. These negative feelings may be mitigated and relieved by healthcare professionals who are trained and prepared to help parents cope with this tragic experience. Conversely, these negative feelings may be compounded or in some cases inadvertently caused by healthcare professionals with whom parents may interact at the time of birth.

In some cases, healthcare professionals who provide care for these parents may not be adequately prepared or trained to provide the appropriate supportive and sensitive care required. Furthermore, healthcare professionals may themselves be emotionally affected by stillbirth and this can influence their interaction with parents.



Information source

For the purposes of the review stillbirth was defined as the death of a baby *in utero* at any time from 20 weeks until immediately before birth. Studies that considered neonatal death, perinatal death (before or after birth), miscarriage, termination of pregnancy for non-medical reasons or pregnancy loss prior to 20 weeks were excluded. It is important to note that any medical definition of stillbirth is unlikely to be meaningful to parents'. As such, parents whose loss of a baby before birth does not align specifically with this period should be treated with the same sensitivity and care. Twenty-two qualitative studies included in the systematic review examined descriptions of the experiences and accounts of parents with the care they received aimed at improving their psychological wellbeing following stillbirth.¹ This phenomenon was investigated from the time of diagnosis and forwards until many years after the tragic event. The majority of included studies reported on both experiences of care from healthcare professionals who were felt to be positive and supportive and those perceived to be negative and distressing.

Development of evidence-based guidance

A series of three documents has been developed to assist healthcare professionals to provide supportive and meaningful care for the parents of stillborn babies. The first document pertains to the time preceding birth from just prior to diagnosis on until induction. The second document relates to the period immediately following birth and the third document contains implications for practice relating to ongoing care and follow-up beyond the immediate experience of stillbirth.

The implications for practice contained within these documents have been developed from the evidence presented in the systematic review and directly based upon its synthesised findings (Level 1 evidence – Meaningfulness,² as well as the input of an expert advisory group.[†] The review protocol and systematic review report have been subjected to a rigorous internal and external review process. Where limited or no evidence was identified in the systematic review, the authors and the expert advisory group developed consensus statements to inform practice.



Part 2 of 3: The birth

Disclaimer

"The procedures described in this document must only be used by people who have appropriate expertise in the field to which the procedure relates. The applicability of any information must be established before relying on it. While care has been taken to ensure that this document summarises available research and expert consensus, any loss, damage, cost, expense or liability suffered or incurred as a result of reliance on these procedures (whether arising in contract, negligence or otherwise) is, to the extent permitted by law, excluded."

± Joanna Briggs Levels of Evidence - Meaningfulness

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|----------------|--|
| Level 1 | Qualitative or mixed-methods systematic review |
| Level 2 | Qualitative or mixed-methods synthesis |
| Level 3 | Single qualitative study |
| Level 4 | Systematic review of expert opinion |
| Level 5 | Expert opinion |

These levels are intended to be used alongside the supporting document outlining their use.² Using Levels of Evidence does not preclude the need for careful reading, critical appraisal and clinical reasoning when applying evidence.

References

- 1 Peters M, Riitano D, Lisy K, Jordan Z, Aromataris E. Providing care for families who have experienced stillbirth: a comprehensive systematic review. The Stillbirth Foundation Australia [Internet]. 2014. Available from: <http://www.stillbirthfoundation.org.au/provision-of-effective-and-appropriate-care-for-families-who-have-experienced-stillbirth/>
- 2 The Joanna Briggs Institute Levels of Evidence and Grades of Recommendation Working Party*. Supporting Document for the Joanna Briggs Institute Levels of Evidence and Grades of Recommendation. The Joanna Briggs Institute [Internet]. 2014. Available from: www.joannabriggs.org
- 3 Pearson A, Wiechula R, Court A, Lockwood C. The JBI Model of evidence-based healthcare. Int J of Evid Based Healthc 2005; 3(8):207-215.

† The expert advisory group was assembled to provide guidance and input for the development of these implications for best practice and to ensure that the information meets the specific needs of parents and families who have experienced stillbirth. For the full details of the expert advisory group please refer to the systematic review.¹

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