

New study highlights the distress of medical staff

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Whilst losing a baby is distressing for parents, until now it has been less widely acknowledged that medical staff themselves can be affected by the losses experienced by their patients.

New research from the University of Leicester shows that staff working in obstetrics and gynaecology, caring for families experiencing loss, can also experience significant and clinical levels of distress.

Senior staff and those with significant experience can be affected as much as their junior colleagues.

Dr Sonya Wallbank, working with Dr Noelle Robertson in the University's Department of Psychology and Christine Cordle, in Medical Psychology, Leicester Royal Infirmary, investigated a total of 340 doctors, nurses and midwives across two NHS Trusts as part of the study.

She received a high response rate for this type of research, which showed that 55% of participants experienced subjective stress levels, which would provide a 'high' level of clinical concern, 24 % 'medium' and 21 % 'low'.

One midwife described how upset she became when she could not locate a fetal heartbeat during a 'straightforward' delivery and realised the baby had died. The midwife stayed with the family through the labour but recounted how difficult she found leaving the hospital that evening and returning to her own family. The loss had a lasting impact on the

midwife, she felt anxious during even routine deliveries and found even being on the ward was difficult.

Sue Bennion, Senior Midwife at Leicester Royal Infirmary said "We welcome this insightful research, and I am pleased to say that we have in place a number of support systems to help midwives through distressing incidents that they might become involved in. All of our midwives have access 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to a supervisor of midwives who can talk through their experiences and work with them to manage any anxieties they may have. They also receive direct support from their manager and AMICA, our staff counseling service, as are our support staff. Unfortunately we sometimes have to deal with difficult or stressful situations but we are committed to providing medical staff with the support systems to enable them to cope, and we are always looking for ways to make that support more accessible."

Dr Wallbank commented: "I have continued my research with one of the Trusts and provided a pilot service to support staff experiencing distress.

"The effectiveness of this service against a control group was shown to be successful and we are now putting a bid together for the recruitment of a Clinical Psychologist to work on a more permanent basis with the Obstetrics team. This will ensure that staff are able to share their distress and remain focused on their work."

Source: University of Leicester

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