

Silence around stillbirth a major issue for bereaved parents

March 2 2018, by Candy Gibson

What's the biggest obstacle facing bereaved parents after losing a child at birth? Society's unwillingness to discuss it openly, says UniSA Ph.D. candidate Danielle Pollock, whose first child, Sofia, was stillborn four years ago. Danielle is calling on health providers to take the lead and provide more information about stillbirth during antenatal classes.

New research from the University of South Australia has uncovered the biggest obstacle facing bereaved parents after losing a child at birth – the silent treatment and stigma surrounding stillbirth.

Four years ago, UniSA Ph.D. candidate Danielle Pollock gave birth to her first child, Sofia.

Sofia was a perfectly normal baby but for some reason her heart stopped beating two days before she was born.

"I got to kiss her, hold her, sing to her and tell her I loved her," Danielle says. I couldn't take her home but every day I think of her. It doesn't get any easier."

What has made the experience harder for 28-year-old Danielle and her husband is the wall of silence surrounding stillbirth.

"Women who experience stillbirth are constantly misunderstood. People avoid you because they don't know what to say and you are made to feel like a leper.

"Society does not encourage us to talk about the child we lost and, instead, we are encouraged to put the experience behind us and move on. No-one asks me my child's name, her birthday, or to see photographs of her. We are completely shut down."

Four years on, Danielle now has a three-year-old son, Charlie, and a newborn, Zoe. She is also in the final year of her Ph.D., exploring the stigma around stillbirth, which affects six parents every day in Australia and 2.6 million worldwide each year.

Despite these numbers, the stigma around stillbirth is entrenched, Danielle says, and not helped by the lack of information from healthcare providers about stillbirth or how to reduce the chances of it happening.

"Babies aren't meant to die – and most in Australia don't – but, unfortunately, six babies are stillborn every day. We are not told about this in antenatal classes and neither are we told how to relate to a bereaved parent who has lost a child at birth.

"I didn't know if I was a mum. Sofiia was my first child, but I wasn't encouraged to acknowledge her. When people ask how many children you have, what are you supposed to say without making the conversation awkward for other people?"

Danielle's research to date has found that more than 80 per cent of bereaved parents and more than 60 per cent of women who had a live birth were not told about the possibility of a stillborn child during their pregnancy. Of the former, they were only told because they had complications.

"Healthcare professionals are very comfortable talking about Down syndrome, spina bifida, listeriosis, even domestic violence. But stillbirth is a subject they avoid. It's probably because they don't want to create

any anxiety, but it would be more helpful if it was discussed in antenatal care."

Danielle hopes to address this in the last stage of her Ph.D. which involves obstetricians, midwives and GPs giving their feedback about stillbirth and how best to educate people.

"I want [healthcare professionals](#) to be able to openly discuss with pregnant women the possibility of stillbirth, but not in a way that will scare them. That is the wrong approach.

"I also want people in general to understand how to relate to bereaved parents and not resort to unhelpful comments such as 'You can always have another'. Babies can't be replaced but they can be acknowledged."

Claire Foord, CEO of stillbirth prevention charity Still Aware, says Danielle's research is "critical for informing change in the way we address stillbirth in Australia. The results of her study could be pivotal for understanding why awareness of [stillbirth](#) on a large scale is imperative for prevention."

Provided by University of South Australia

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