

Coming to terms with stillbirth

Nadine Fisher | 23rd March 2010

THE loss of a child is something that most parents cannot begin to imagine.

But for some it is a reality they live with every day.

In Australia each year more than 2000 babies – or six every single day – are delivered stillborn.

Tweed couple Vanessa and David Little had a stillborn baby girl named Sophie five years ago.



Vanessa Little and her daughter Carlie Jane with Vanessa's father John Polley.

Their loss will never be forgotten, but they want to raise awareness of stillbirths to help other parents, and to raise much-needed funds for research through the Stillbirth Foundation.

Mrs Little said stillbirth and miscarriage were taboo subjects for most people.

"No-one wants to talk about it. No-one is ever comfortable talking about death, especially the death of a baby," she said.

"But it shouldn't be like that; unfortunately death is a part of life. As sad and gut-wrenching as it is, we need to raise awareness of stillbirth and the funds needed for research, because in Australia there are six babies delivered stillborn every single day.

"And yet there is little funding put into finding out the cause of these stillbirths."

Mrs Little explained that as an expecting parent you have visions and dreams for the child you are carrying, and these feelings do not disappear with the death of the baby.

"Delivering a stillborn baby leaves parents and family members feeling robbed of any time with them," she said, with tears welling in her eyes.

"With time there is an element of ease to talk about your baby, but many people are unable or too uncomfortable to even mention their name, but I'm so proud to talk about my little Sophie and I'm passionate about helping the Stillbirth Foundation because of what we've been through.

"My husband David recently raised funds for the (Stillbirth) foundation when he competed in the Six Foot Track Marathon, which took him from near Katoomba in the Blue Mountains to the Jenolan Caves – a distance of 45 kilometres.

"His aim was to raise \$1 for each stillborn baby in Australia last year, his target was \$2177 and we're almost there."

Emotions are close to the surface as Vanessa Little and her father John Polley try to get the words out that will best explain the depth of emotion they feel for Sophie, and the difficulty they face trying to explain their loss as a parent and grandparent.

"Stillbirth doesn't just affect the parents but the entire family and friends," Mr Polley, a founding member of the Stillbirth Foundation, said.

"And anyone who has been through this would find the book *Pregnancy Loss – Surviving Miscarriage and Stillbirth* such a help," he said.

“While no-one can ever fully understand without going through it, this book gives the reader some empathy for what the parents would be feeling and how best to support them.”

Mrs Little said she had searched bookstores after Sophie was stillborn to find a book that might help to explain what she was feeling.

“There was absolutely nothing available at that time; *Pregnancy Loss – Surviving Miscarriage and Stillbirth* is the first book of its kind,” she said.

“Parents of stillborn babies start blaming themselves for the tragedy.

“You start looking at all the things you did or didn’t do as something that may have caused the stillbirth. So to be able to read other people’s stories and know that you are not alone in how you are feeling is comforting.

“It really does help to bring a bit of peace, as they are perfect little bubbas that are just born sleeping.”

Specifically the book addresses the need and the desire for answers, giving direction on what experts know about causes and risk factors, as well as discussing the latest areas of research.

Mrs Little said it was now five years since the death of Sophie, and even though they had been able to have another baby, Sophie was still remembered each and every day.

“We as a family do special things on her anniversary and have a plaque on a garden bench where we can sit. We also have a Christmas bauble with Sophie’s name on it that goes on the tree each year. And her siblings will know about her,” she says with tears in her eyes.

Mrs Little said being able to hold her baby girl and take her home from the hospital for a short time helped to bring some peace.

“It’s so important that parents get the opportunity to have these moments, to feel that their baby was real. Many years ago stillborn babies were taken away by medical staff and put in an unmarked grave.

“The parents usually didn’t even get to hold their baby, and it was rarely spoken about again. Mothers were just left to deal with the loss of their baby silently.”

The Stillbirth Foundation, founded by Emma McLeod, is based in Sydney and about to go Australia-wide to raise the profile and awareness of miscarriage and stillbirth as well as much-needed funds for research.

Pregnancy Loss –Surviving Miscarriage and Stillbirth, by Zoe Taylor, is available at bookstores and through the Stillbirth Foundation. A percentage of proceeds from book sales go to the foundation.

For more details check the website www.stillbirthfoundation.org.au

The facts

2952 men died from prostate cancer

2643 adults died from breast cancer

2091 babies were stillborn

1648 people died from skin cancer

795 women died from ovarian cancer

66 babies died from SIDS

Information provided by the Stillbirth Foundation (taken from the Deaths in Australia 2006 – ABS and the AIHW National Perinatal Statistics Reports.