

Forever an angel

After nine months of pregnancy the birth of her daughter was supposed to be the happiest day of her life, but for Sally Heppleston it wasn't to be. This is her story



Pictures:
Jason Edwards

From left: Sally and Simon Heppleston say goodbye to their beautiful baby Hope; Baby Angus is helping heal mum Sally's broken heart; Simon and Sally with Angus.

It is a familiar scenario. Whether you have been trying for a long time or a little, whether it is planned or unplanned, once that pregnancy test shows positive, your life changes forever. Excitement generally sets in fast. Perhaps a little fear as well, but mostly excitement. You start picking names and imagining a happy future with your precious child.

You tell your partner, family and maybe a few friends. But you mostly keep the news about the precious bundle growing inside to yourself – until you get to the “safe” part of pregnancy.

But for anyone who has lost a baby, there is no safe stage of pregnancy. I learnt this the hard way.

My first baby was stillborn at 40 weeks and 5 days on August 19, 2008, after a perfectly normal pregnancy.

Our little girl, who we named Hope, died inside my body as she was trying to be born.

Four days past my due date and three days in to early labour, I was worried my normally very active little bub wasn't moving much.

An ultrasound at the hospital confirmed our worst fears – our baby's heart had stopped.

She had died and the innocent person I was died with her. I would have to deliver her the following day stillborn.

I would labour, moan, grunt and push the baby out like everyone else, but there would be no reward at the end.

We would return home empty-handed, broken-hearted to a shattered life that didn't remotely resemble what it once was. Our nursery was quiet; our dreams for a happy future destroyed.

It is likely that on that day I delivered my perfectly-formed eight pound precious baby girl, five other babies were also stillborn in Australia.

Stillbirth is when a baby dies in utero anywhere from 20 weeks onwards.

Some 2000 babies are stillborn ever year – about one in every 140 pregnancies.

That is more than 20 times the SIDS rate and considerably more than the road toll. Alarmingly, this horrible statistic has not changed in more than 10 years.

More often than not there is no known cause, but in some cases deaths have been linked to cord or placenta problems, infection, high blood pressure, maternal age or obesity.

Emma McLeod founded the Stillbirth Foundation Australia in 2005 after losing her baby at 36 weeks.

The foundation raises money to fund research into understanding why so many babies are dying, but also aims to raise awareness of stillbirth, which is something of a taboo subject.

“The death of a baby is a devastating experience and has life-long emotional consequences. One of the most common questions asked is: ‘how could I not know that stillbirth happens today?’ It's a legitimate question, and a challenge that we are working to change,” Emma says.

“Stillbirth is a significant public health issue, but has a stigma attached to it. We live in a society that doesn't deal well with death, let alone the death of a baby.

“It is an isolating and emotionally complex experience and the lack of understanding only adds to the sense of isolation.”

Most pregnancy losses, however, don't even make it to second trimester.

According to a new book, *Pregnancy Loss: Surviving miscarriage and stillbirth*, released by mother and journalist Zoe Taylor, there are 55,000 miscarriages in Australia every year.

Zoe, who has suffered four painful miscarriages, says as many as one in four pregnancies miscarry, most by eight weeks.

Preston mother and good friend of mine, Kim Orr, also travelled a long and difficult path to motherhood.

Her first, much-wanted pregnancy was ectopic and ended on the operating table at five weeks.

An ectopic pregnancy is when the baby forms in the fallopian tube or somewhere else outside the uterus and can also be fatal to the mother.

Kim vividly remembers the excitement when she fell pregnant: “We had only been trying for two months when I got those magical two lines. They were very faint but they were there.”

After learning her hormone levels weren't high enough, Kim was sent for an ultrasound. She was then rushed to hospital where her pregnancy was terminated and her fallopian tube removed.

“One minute I was at work and then all of a sudden I was being admitted to hospital,” Kim says. “My logical brain knew the baby couldn't survive – and neither could I – but at the same time all I could think was how could I choose to remove my living pregnancy: my little baby with a heartbeat.”

Just after her loss, Kim received my devastating news that Hope had been stillborn.

She decided against coming to Hope's funeral, as she didn't think she would be able to cope seeing Hope's tiny white coffin, which my husband Simon tenderly carried from the hearse to the grave.

Kim says she felt heartbroken over her own loss and couldn't imagine the pain I must have been feeling to have lost a baby at full term.

“I couldn't justify my own sense of loss in comparison, but still it was my loss and it was still real,” she says.

When Kim became pregnant a second time, she was buoyed by the news that the pregnancy wasn't ectopic, but on the morning of her second ultrasound, after

having seen a heartbeat at six weeks, she had an uneasy feeling. She “knew”. Call it mother's intuition, but you get a certain sense of dread when you know something's wrong. Kim had lost her second baby.

A few months later, Kim fell pregnant again, and just a few weeks before that, so did I. Hope had been gone just on six months and joy, albeit muted, returned to our lives.

As Kim and I would come to learn, pregnancy after loss is an incredibly complex beast and well-meaning people who constantly assure you all will be well, don't do you any good. You can never fully relax until you get that living baby in your arms. I spent those nine months frozen in fear.

In November 2009, 15 months after Hope was born and 38 weeks in to my incredibly terrifying, yet healthy pregnancy, my son Angus came into the world alive and screaming.

I will never fully be able to articulate the sense of relief I felt on that magical day, nor the amazing healing effect he has had on my weary heart since.

A month later, Kim delivered her baby girl Katelyn.

For anyone who has lost a baby, no matter what the gestation, there is a profound loneliness that accompanies the loss. For me, there is a sense of overwhelming sadness when asked: “how many children do you have?”

I speak the truth of my loss. I don't hide the fact there was a baby who came before Angus who was loved and is dearly missed. It makes others uncomfortable, but I don't do Hope's legacy any justice by covering her up. Stillbirth is real.

For me, Angus is just an unconventional second born. He's the first child I got to mother, but it was his big sister Hope who made me the mother I am today. 🌟

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GETTING HELP

● SANDS is a support group for parents who have experienced the death of a baby through miscarriage, stillbirth, or shortly after birth. Visit sandsvic.org.au or call 9899 0218

● SIDS and Kids also offers bereavement support to families after stillbirth. Visit sidsandkids.org or call 1300 308 307

● The Stillbirth Foundation works to reduce stillbirth in Australia, fund and encourage research and increase public awareness. See stillbirthfoundation.org.au