

Stillbirth Foundation News

November 2008



stillbirth
FOUNDATION INC.

little feet taking big steps...to reduce stillbirth

The reality of stillbirth

Today in Australia, five parents will be told that their baby has died before birth. Usually, this is the first time that parents will hear the words stillbirth or stillborn spoken in modern society and it is often an event that happens completely unexpectedly.

Parents must learn to live with their loss, in a society that defines the value of a person through life.

A stillborn baby, and to an extent their family, is defined by the term stillbirth, which in itself can bring a conversation to an abrupt halt. Why is that? Stillborn is not as confronting as the true definition of 'deadborn', used by an 8 year old boy, happily and without reservation, to describe his sister to his friends!

The word stillbirth may also evoke images of a Victorian past. A woman labouring with the assistance of an outcast woman (who had midwifery skills and was therefore seen as a witch), in a four poster bed in a mansion with a raging storm outside. Finally, after much screaming, a cold blue creature is delivered. An image that is far removed from reality.

There is a stigma attached to the word stillbirth. Stillborn babies are simply born still, as beautiful pink babes who are important and much loved members of a family. That is the reason that the Stillbirth Foundation exists, to represent our babies, to demonstrate the reality of stillbirth and to reduce its incidence in Australia.

Patrons

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The Stillbirth Foundation operates to reduce the incidence of stillbirth in Australia, by:

- funding and encouraging research into stillbirth and
- increasing public awareness about stillbirth.



At right, Jo & Mark Kiely with their daughter, Caitlin, stillborn at 40 weeks on 15 March 2003.





Stillbirth: It won't happen to me... What every woman should know about stillbirth

In Australia 2,000 babies or one in every 140 babies are stillborn – a rate that has not decreased in almost 20 years. A high portion of these, about 300 every year, are born at term with no known cause for death. Unexplained stillbirth occurs over 10 times more frequently than infant deaths from SIDS.

It is vital that pregnant women, or women considering pregnancy, receive the information and support they need to make informed decisions and choose to modify their behaviour to reduce risks to both their and their unborn child's health.

New research finds one third of stillbirths are preventable.

The Stillbirth Foundation has co-funded new research from the Australian and New Zealand

Stillbirth Alliance (ANZSA) which indicates that at least one third of all stillbirths are primarily due to factors which are potentially avoidable.

The three most important avoidable factors that were identified by the research team include:

- mothers carrying excess weight;
- those who are over 35 years of age;
- smoking during pregnancy.

Some other potentially modifiable factors that have been identified include severe stress, advanced paternal age, inadequate antenatal care, previous caesarean section, excess caffeine intake and alcohol

and substance abuse. First pregnancy and prolonged pregnancy are another two potential factors. However, all these factors require further research.

These factors are in addition to the known medical risk factors that doctors and obstetricians will oversee during pregnancy such as hypertension, diabetes and infection.

Professor Ellwood, of ANZSA, said, "With up to 30% of stillbirths remaining unexplained, it is important to consider modifiable risk factors in order to reduce the number of these deaths".

"While there are obviously still many unexplained stillbirths this research is particularly heartening because it gives a clear indication of things women can do to reduce the risk."

Our Little Feet Taking Big Steps Ball is the major fundraising event for the Stillbirth Foundation and preparations for the 2009 Ball are underway. We need some fabulous prizes to help us reach our goal of raising \$100,000 and are looking for people to assist us in sourcing prizes, such as trips, accommodation, appliances, vouchers, accessories and sporting memorabilia. If you would like to help, or are able to donate a prize, please contact us at info@stillbirthfoundation.org.au.

The annual service of Remembrance, Consolation and Hope will be held at St Mary's Catholic Church Miller and Ridge Street North Sydney on Friday December 5th at 7.30pm.

The service welcomes all who have experienced the loss of a child or grandchild as a result of miscarriage, stillbirth, death in the newborn period or the death at any time of an older child.

This service recognises that the approach of Christmas, which celebrates the birth of a special baby and with its emphasis on the family, may be a particularly painful and poignant time for those who are living with loss and grief. Many families have found the ritual of coming together with others at this time soothing and reassuring.

The service will be of approximately one hour in duration. Whilst children are most welcome to attend, we would ask all attending the service to be sensitive to the experience of others. It would be appreciated if parents keep their children with them. Should children become bored or disruptive it is suggested that you move them to the grassed area outside which can be accessed through a door on the left of the church.

As in previous years, photographic images of the children will be projected into the dome of the church. If you would like to provide a digital image, please email it to Deborah de Wilde at peterbarr@bigpond.com.

If you have any questions please contact Deborah on 0412 514 996.





Twins found in Tutankhamun's tomb

Two stillborn children found in the tomb of Tutankhamun could be the twin daughters of the teenage Pharaoh, according to Egyptian officials.

Tutankhamun ascended to the throne aged about nine and married Ankhesenamun at the age of 12, but the couple had no surviving children. Although in life he was of only moderate historical significance, in death Tutankhamun achieved worldwide fame thanks to the virtually intact state of his tomb when it was opened by British explorer Howard Carter in 1922.

The mummified children have never been on public show and have been stored at the Faculty of Medicine at Cairo University since their discovery in 1922. Despite the different sizes of

the two foetuses, historians believe they would have made more sense as a single pregnancy for Ankhesenamun.

The smaller foetus is five months in gestational age and less than 30 centimetres (11.8 inches) in height while the other is estimated to be between seven and nine months in gestational age and measures 38.5 centimetres (15.16 inches).

If the DNA tests confirm that the twins are in fact the stillborn children of King Tutankhamun, one can't help but marvel at the foresight of the

Ancient Egyptians in their acknowledgment and rituals surrounding a stillborn child. While we've come a long way since the stiflingly 'silent' approach to stillborn children, questions still circulate about whether embracing and bonding with a stillborn baby is beneficial for parents. If we look to the practices of this Ancient culture – one of the earliest civilisations with mathematics, law, writing, paper, architecture and medicine – then perhaps this question is answered.

The DNA tests and CT scans should be finalised by December 2008.

Improving Maternity Services in Australia

The Rudd Government is conducting a comprehensive review of maternity services in Australia canvassing a range of issues associated with the services across the spectrum of care including antenatal services, birthing options, postnatal services up to six weeks after birth, and peer and social support for women in the prenatal and postnatal periods. The Stillbirth Foundation congratulates the Minister for Health and Ageing, Nicola Roxon MP, for instigating this review and is pleased to have the opportunity to comment.

The Stillbirth Foundation has prepared a written response to this review focusing on the massive public health issue of stillbirth.

The Foundation invited Deborah de Wilde OAM, in her capacity as Medical Advisor for the Stillbirth Foundation, to be our representative at a Round Table Discussion about Peer and Social Support in the Perinatal Period. Deborah is an Obstetric Social Worker who has many years experience in caring for families whose baby has died and is ideally suited to represent all families and babies who have died.

Deborah originally trained as a nurse and midwife, and during her early career worked with her colleagues Dr Peter Barr and Julie Dunsmore to develop a more humane and responsive way of caring for families experiencing the death of their

baby. Along with Peter and Julie, Deborah is a co-founder of a support group for these families, the Stillbirth and Newborn Death Support (SANDS, NSW).

The groundbreaking care that Peter, Julie and Deborah offered families was portrayed in the award winning documentary, "Some Babies Die". The experience of observing the manner in which birth and death was managed within a large teaching hospital, led Deborah to embark on a Social Work degree. Deborah is currently a Consultant Obstetrics Social Worker at the Mater, North Shore Private and Prince of Wales Private Hospitals where she co-ordinates the care of families who experience miscarriage, stillbirth or the death of their baby after birth. Over the years, Deborah has assisted many, many people who have lost a child in a variety of circumstances and has helped them ride the often frightening times and complex waves of emotions that accompanies the death of a baby.

Deborah is honoured by this opportunity to present to the Federal Government, the needs of families whose baby has died. The Stillbirth Foundation is, as always, incredibly thankful to Deborah for her commitment, dedication and knowledge and her willingness to share that with others.





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Talking about stillbirth: A male perspective

University of Newcastle (NSW) honours student researcher, Shari Bonnette, has recognized there is little research available that explores men's perspectives of stillbirth. To address this she is currently undertaking social research on men's experience of stillbirth, with a focus specifically on grief, identity and support networks.

To participate in this research project you must be male, aged over 18 years and whose female partner has experienced stillbirth between 6 months and 3 years ago.

Involvement means attending a one-hour interview, which can be held throughout the Hunter Valley, Central Coast and Sydney. If you live outside this area and are keen to participate, please contact Shari to discuss alternative arrangements.

For further information, including a research information statement and ethics approval information from the University of Newcastle, visit Shari's website at www.stillbirth.nc.com.au. Shari can be contacted by email at stillbirth@nc.com.au or by phone on 0437 609 561.

1 in every 140 babies born in Australia is stillborn

2,946 men died from prostate cancer

2,736 adults died from breast cancer

1,979* babies were stillborn

1,273 people died from skin melanoma

884 women died from ovarian cancer

87 babies died from SIDS

Deaths in Australia 2005 (Australian Bureau of Statistics,
* AIHW National Perinatal Statistics Report)

How you can help?

Please help the Stillbirth Foundation raise our first \$1 million for stillbirth research, through a donation and/or by purchasing a Stella Bear. Donation Forms are available for download from our website:

www.stillbirthfoundation.org.au

Website kindly maintained by www.shawware.com.au

Newsletter Team:

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Thank you to the above team who have produced this newsletter. If you have an idea for a future edition, please contact Jo Kiely at jo@stillbirthfoundation.org.au

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