

# These days parents of stillborn babies are encouraged to be open about it 'I can't pretend she didn't exist'

In part two of our series, **Merryn Porter** examines the known risks associated with stillbirth.

DANIELLE Lewis was in bed after a busy day when she realised she had not felt the familiar kicks of her unborn baby.

Mrs Lewis, of Sylvania, prodded her stomach, had a sweet drink and, in desperation, instructed husband Nathan to shout at her belly.

When nothing worked, they left their daughter, Mikayla, now 3½, with family and drove the 40 minutes to hospital in dead silence.

By the time they got there, Mrs Lewis, who was 25-weeks pregnant with a daughter, was distraught.

In the examination room, staff confirmed their worst fears. "They eventually said 'She's lying really low and we can't find a heartbeat - she's dead'," Mrs Lewis recalled.

Labour was induced the following morning and over the next 10 hours, further failed attempts were made. All the while, Mrs Lewis could hear women in labour and trolleys containing newborn babies being wheeled along the hall.

Their daughter, Isabella, was finally born almost three days after they arrived at hospital.

Mrs Lewis said the delay allowed them to begin grieving their loss and described a sense of joy when she arrived. "One of our concerns was what she was going to look like," Mrs Lewis said. "She was 25 weeks

and like a newborn, just small. She had hair. I'd been dreading what it was going to be like but it just looked like she was sleeping."

Over the next hours, both sets of grandparents visited, as did big sister Mikayla and an aunt and uncle.

A midwife tenderly washed and dressed her while speaking to her the whole time and made imprints of her tiny hands and feet, which she placed in a scrapbook alongside photos.

After initially avoiding Facebook, Mrs Lewis decided to raise awareness of stillbirth by posting "Isabella's story".

She is thankful that grieving is encouraged after a stillbirth, unlike in her mother's day. She also had a stillborn child, whose name Mrs Lewis didn't know until recently. "My mother wrote it in a letter because she felt she couldn't talk about it. I didn't want that for Mikayla."

A corner of Mrs' Lewis bedroom is set aside for the scrapbook, photos and Isabella's ashes. "It's not something we hide," she said. "Some people might be offended that we have photos up and talk about her [but] she's my daughter. I cannot pretend she didn't exist."

The Stillbirth Foundation has a Christmas in July fund-raising ball at the Four Seasons Hotel in the city on July 25. Tickets: \$175.

**Details: [stillbirthfoundation.org.au](http://stillbirthfoundation.org.au) or 0416 146 272.**

## KNOWN RISKS

THE Stillbirth Foundation is about to begin a public-education campaign to warn of the known risk factors for stillbirth. These include diabetes, high blood pressure, the age of the mother (first-time mothers over age 35 have an elevated risk), pre-pregnancy obesity, infectious agents such as listeria (which can occur in soft cheese or under-cooked meats, etc) and some viruses, such as the common *parvovirus* that's easily transmitted from toddlers.

While the cause of about half of all stillbirths is unknown, some couples do get answers.

Despite taking all the recommended precautions during her pregnancy, Mrs Lewis later learned an underlying medical condition caused a blood clot to form in the umbilical cord, cutting off her baby's blood supply.

Should she become pregnant again, she will need injections of an anti-clotting agent until 34 weeks.

Suzanne Grosvenor, of Otley, learned a rare condition - *vasa praevia* - in which the umbilical cord attaches to the sac surrounding the baby and not the placenta, caused the stillbirth of her full-term daughter, Amelia.

When the doctor broke her waters, he unknowingly ruptured the sac, causing the unborn baby to lose her blood supply. Had the problem been detected during the routine 20-week ultrasound, the baby could have been safely delivered via caesarean.



**Story to tell:** Danielle Lewis with husband Nathan and daughter Mikayla posted "Isabella's story" on Facebook to warn others about stillbirth. **Picture:** Lisa McMahon

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