

STILLBIRTH — A MOTHER'S PERSONAL ANGUISH

It's a girl ... then

Melbourne's Sally and Simon Heppleston lost their first child, daughter Hope Angel, last year at 40 weeks and five days.

Now pregnant with their second child — a son, due on December 1 — Mrs Heppleston writes exclusively about their experience in a bid to break the taboo of stillbirth and raise public awareness about the issue.

"There are almost as many stillborn babies as there are breast cancer victims each year ... but why isn't more being done?" she said. "I want more people to know about the real risks. I want more people to know that despite being young, fit and healthy and having an easy pregnancy, it does not mean your baby will come home with you."

MY first child, a little girl we named Hope Angel, was born sleeping after a robustly healthy pregnancy at 40 weeks and 5 days, on August 19, 2008. She weighed 3.6kg and was perfect — she just didn't arrive breathing in our waiting arms. While I am pregnant again now with child number two, I'm struggling to pick up the pieces as I navigate through life without my darling daughter. I'm just so heartbroken. And so hopeful things will work out this time. I don't want to come home empty-handed again.

SHOCKING NEWS

At home I knew something was wrong. At the hospital our worst fears were realised. The baby that was still inside me was lifeless. I was shaking. The hospital obstetrician told me to stop and held my hand. I looked at my husband, Simon, and this was the moment that makes my heart ache the most — tears were flowing and he looked as if he was going to fall over. Fatherhood had just slipped from his grasp.

When the obstetrician said the words, "I'm so sorry", the world, as we knew it, ended. Hope's heart had stopped and I think for a brief moment, mine did, too. I don't remember much of what happened next, but we were escorted through the waiting room, full of happy pregnant people, and taken for a scan just to be certain.

I told Simon not to look. The image on the screen was just too distressing. I was told that

delivering my baby naturally was best for my health, and I was given two options — go home for the night or stay in hospital. We decided to take our baby home one last time. But first our family arrived looking as shocked as I felt.

On the way home in the car, something kept repeating in my head: "My baby was alive this morning." I was in utter shock and deep denial.

No one knew what to do. Cups of tea — and phone calls — were made. And I was talking of having another baby. It was the only way I could see clearly. I was rubbing my belly and thinking about how much I missed her. She died and a large part of me had died, too. No longer her giant incubator, I was now her giant tomb.

I didn't sleep. The contractions started again. But they didn't leave me excited, as they had on the previous four nights. On this night, the contractions left me gutted.

HOPE'S BIRTH

BACK at the hospital the next morning, I slumped on the bed where I was to give birth. I didn't want to see anyone. I just wanted it to be over.

Nine months of joy and happiness and I was now about to enter a lifetime of hell and heartache. Eventually a doctor broke my waters, bringing with it a strand of our baby's hair.

"Your baby has brown hair," she said. I was so excited to learn this detail — the first real thing we would know about the child we couldn't keep.

I had wanted a drug-free labour, so the idea of having



every drug under the sun didn't appeal — but neither did delivering a dead baby. At the very least, I thought, I deserved to be comfortable.

My family started filing into the delivery suite, coming and going as my labour progressed. They were taking turns to be with me. And cry. Mostly cry. I was beginning to worry for everyone else. At least I had the drugs to numb my pain.

At 3pm, I was told I was ready to push. I couldn't believe it. The moment I'd been looking

forward to for nine months. The mother instinct I had heard so much about kicked in when my warm, albeit slightly pale, baby was placed on my chest. As soon as I laid eyes on her, a wave of intense love swept over me. I loved her with every ounce of my being. It was overwhelming. Even though Hope wasn't with us, I knew that instant bond I had with her would never be broken. Mother and child, together forever.

However, I will always remember the silence of those

first moments. Not just a stillbirth, it was a silent birth. We should have been listening to her first cries, but instead there was her silence — and my sobbing.

MEETING HOPE

UNTIL she was born, we didn't know if we were having a boy or a girl. I'd always wanted Simon to be the one to tell me. "It's a girl!" he exclaimed, with excitement in his voice like any first-time father.

I held my baby girl and fussed over her with the care of any new mother. I was so proud. I had longed to see her precious little face. We decided to call our baby Hope Angel, not the name we'd previously agreed on. Hope was fitting because it was all we were clinging to.

Like all proud dads, Simon cut the cord and completed that special parenting ritual. It was a small step to take to make sure we weren't missing out on any of those "normal" things.

Hope looked like me and she had Simon's chin. Though she never got to look at us, we gently peeled back her delicate little eyelids to reveal her blue eyes — just like Daddy's.

Apart from a heart that did not beat, Hope was perfect.

Our family filed back into the room to meet our beautiful baby. Most held her. Everyone kissed her sweet little forehead. People took photos. Everyone cried. The midwives and doctors were crying, too.

As common as stillbirths are, I don't think they see many at 40-plus weeks. That sort of thing just isn't supposed to

'She died and a large part of me had died, too. No longer her giant incubator, I was now her giant tomb'

happen. And I certainly didn't think it would happen to us. We were now those "other people".

I had prepared a text message to send. It read: "It's a X! Proud new parents Sally and Simon are thrilled to announce the birth of X at X weighing X. We are overjoyed. All three well." Instead it now read "Our precious daughter Hope Angel, born sleeping at 4.35pm. Now watching over us from heaven."

We sent it out far and wide. We can only imagine this news shattered the hearts of everyone who received it.

TIME WITH HOPE

SIMON and I took lots of photos of Hope, but a friend and my sister arranged for a professional to take some, too. And so, as proud new parents, we dressed our little girl ready for her first photo shoot. She had to look her best. More than anything, we wanted to give her a bath. The family left the room. It gave me a chance to shower and to spend some time alone with Hope. For a brief moment, I almost forgot she

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came the silence



Hope is lost: Simon holds his stillborn daughter's hand (opposite page); Hope Angel's footprints and a lock of her hair (above); an empty nursery (below); and Sally and Simon with a picture of their first born. They are expecting their second child in December. Pictures: GAVIN BLUE and TONY GOUGH



was gone. Looking at her lying in her little crib, Hope looked like a sleeping newborn. So perfect and still. Why wouldn't her chest rise and fall? My brain couldn't process it.

Then we recorded Hope's statistics. She was a good size. Eight pounds (3.6kg), 51cm long, and a head circumference of 33cm.

Simon bathed her. Just as any new father would, he fumbled his way through it, but he was so gentle with her, being careful not to let her sweet little face go under the water.

I had carried our darling daughter for nine months and this was his time to be with her.

We dressed her in the outfit we had intended to put our baby in had she been born alive — an aqua jumpsuit, yellow singlet and a yellow flannel wrap with little farm animals.

Every care was taken to give us the same experience as parents who had given birth to living babies.

I didn't smile for the photos, though. I was too sad. Even though I thought she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, I just couldn't muster a smile. I just wanted her alive.

I think Hope took all my smiles with her. She took Simon's youthful good looks and innocence, too. Days earlier he looked like a boy with the world at his feet. Now he looked like a weathered old man who had seen too much heartache for his 29 years.

Sometimes I think I would be happier if Hope had been alive for a day. Maybe an hour. Maybe 10 minutes. We're just so sad she never got to see us,

hear us or feel us on the outside. I wanted to tell her how loved she was. I wanted to know she heard me. I wanted to see her response.

That night, the family left, realising we needed time with our new baby — and to get ready for the painful goodbyes the next day.

ONE NIGHT WITH HOPE

ONE of the midwives offered to do some hand and footprints, which were then recorded in a little purple book, along with a small lock of Hope's hair. It was slightly curly and dark, but in patches it looked lighter.

We then made our way to a ward. The midwife wheeled me and Simon wheeled Hope. I avoided eye contact with everyone we went past. We went to a ward away from the happy mothers and babies.

The nurses in this ward were matter-of-fact. They had a job to do. They were very clinical, noting my observations — and they looked slightly uncomfortable with us carrying on as if Hope was alive and all was well. Shock is a strange thing.

Simon put Hope in bed with me. I hugged her. I fell asleep. This was the first sleep I'd had in days. It was a deep sleep. I felt at peace. Just me and my baby, just as it had been for nine months, except finally she'd made it to the outside world.

THE DAY WE LET HOPE GO

BEFORE we knew it, morning had arrived. It was the time to hold Hope again. We had some



precious moments with her. Holding her, fussing over her, kissing her sweet face. Kissing each other. Crying. I ran my finger over all the bumps and grooves in her face, desperately trying to take it all in.

Hope was now very cold. No longer warm from being inside me and from her bath. But her cool cheeks, lips and forehead were pleasant to kiss. I remember thinking that whenever anything cool touches my lips it would remind me of kissing my beautiful firstborn baby girl.

Later that day Hope was blessed in the hospital chapel. This was our way of honouring her short and sweet little life.

After the ceremony, it was time to say goodbye. The family filed past, gave us hugs and kisses and said goodbye to our Hope. And then there were the three of us. The proud parents and their beautiful daughter, who had been conceived and carried with love.

We cried. We told her how much we loved her and how much we missed her. We dragged ourselves up to leave.

And I couldn't look back, it was too painful. We had just looked at Hope for the final time. We were never supposed to leave the hospital without our baby.

● Hope was buried at Eltham Cemetery six days after she was born.

RESEARCH TO HELP SAVE LIVES

A NATIONAL research campaign has been launched to try to decrease the number of stillborn babies.

Every year, about 2000 Australian babies are stillborn — and the rate has not decreased in more than a decade.

Stillbirth Foundation Australia founder Emma McLeod said she was "horrified to discover there was no research being conducted" after her child was stillborn.

A baby is stillborn when it dies in the womb from 20 weeks into the pregnancy to immediately before birth.

"It's such a complex problem and we don't understand a lot about why these babies are dying," Ms McLeod said. "We need to go back to basic science and basic research to do that. That's why Stillbirth Foundation Australia is offering research grants."

Ms McLeod said stillbirth struggled to get public attention because "it's a conversation stopper".

For more details, go to stillbirthfoundation.org.au