



Media Release
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Australian hospitals neglecting best practice? Unexplained stillbirth rates drop when guidelines are applied

New research funded by the Stillbirth Foundation Australia has revealed that up to 60% of deaths of babies whilst in the womb could be explained if Australian hospitals implemented and followed the PSANZ/ANZSA Perinatal Mortality Audit Guidelines.¹

Six babies are stillborn every day in Australia. Despite improvements in health care, this rate of stillbirth has not changed significantly over the past decade. Parents are often left without answers, with more than 30% of deaths classified as having unexplained causes.

The purpose of the PSANZ/ANZSA best practice guidelines are to enable a systematic approach to the investigation and audit following a stillbirth. The guidelines recommend a set of core investigations following a stillbirth and include detailed information on the importance of investigation, providing the framework for quality improvement in the management of stillbirths. The overall aim is to help classify and improve the process of investigation to enable prevention and appropriate counselling for bereaved parents. Although the guidelines have been issued nationally, it is unclear how many hospitals are actively implementing them.

The research, headed by Dr Adrienne Gordon², involved all stillbirths delivered at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital (RPAH) in Sydney between November 2005 and March 2008. Of these, 34% were unexplained. Following the implementation of the new best practice guidelines this figure dropped to 13%.

“The study has demonstrated a significant proportion of unexplained stillbirths can be reclassified as explained if appropriate investigations are performed. The unexplained proportion is now significantly less than the national or NSW statistics and is one of the lowest published,” said Dr Gordon.

The Stillbirth Foundation Australia, a non-profit organisation dedicated to increasing public awareness and reducing the incidence of stillbirth, believes compliance with the guidelines should be mandatory in maternity hospitals around Australia.

“We are calling on hospitals around the country to implement these guidelines immediately,” said Stillbirth Foundation Australia founder, Emma McLeod. “Reducing unexplained deaths has important implications for bereaved families and their clinicians. This helps us focus on the underlying reasons for the tragic deaths and we can set clear research priorities for the future.”

While the PSANZ best practice guidelines are critical to reducing the number of unexplained stillbirths, even after implementation 13% will still remain unexplained. The Stillbirth Foundation Australia continues to support research to investigate the causes for this 13%.

The following representatives are available for interviews and further discussion:

- Emma McLeod, founder of Stillbirth Foundation Australia

¹ These guidelines are available at <http://www.psanzpnm.org/guideline.html>

² Department of Neonatal Medicine, Royal Prince Alfred Hospital Sydney, and Faculty of Medicine, University of Sydney



- Dr Adrienne Gordon, author of 'Reclassification of unexplained stillbirths using clinical practice guidelines'
- Dr Jonathan Morris, Obstetrics & Gynaecology Professor, University of Sydney and Royal North Shore Hospital
- Linda Price, Mother of Ella Grace Price, stillborn at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital on 22 February 2009

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For more information please contact, Kate Young at Horizon Communication Group on 02 8572 5611 or kate@horizoncommunication.com.au

Notes to Editor

About the Stillbirth Foundation Australia

The Stillbirth Foundation is a non-profit organisation dedicated to reducing the incidence of stillbirth. The Foundation operates to encourage and fund research into stillbirth and to increase public awareness of this serious health issue. The Foundation's income comes from, most often given in memory of babies. In just four years the Stillbirth Foundation has raised \$600,000 through fundraising events and from donations, however to continue their important work in Australia the Foundation needs to start raising at least \$1 million a year. For further information, past research or to make a donation, visit www.stillbirthfoundation.org.au

The Little Feet Taking Big Steps Ball is the Stillbirth Foundation Australia's major annual fundraising event. It will be held on Saturday 25th July at the Four Seasons Hotel, Sydney. Guests are invited to come together to raise money to fund and encourage research into stillbirth and make a significant difference to the future reduction of stillbirth in Australia. More information can be found at <http://www.stillbirthfoundation.org.au/node/60>.