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Arranging a Funeral Following a Pregnancy Loss

Jeannette Littlemore, Sheelagh McGuinness, Patrick Dandy, Danielle Fuller, Karolina Kuberska and Sarah Turner

Introduction

For parents who have been looking forward to the birth of their child, experiencing a pregnancy loss, be it due to a stillbirth, miscarriage or a termination following a diagnosis of foetal abnormality, can be an extremely distressing experience. Although the thought of arranging a funeral in such circumstances may be somewhat daunting, a sensitively planned funeral can be a source of solace and provide an opportunity for parents to start to come to terms with the death of their baby. Funeral directors can play a key role in helping parents to memorialise their loss in a positive way, helping them to create memories that they can draw on to help them through the bereavement process.

In order for funeral directors to provide the best possible support for parents who find themselves in this situation, it is useful to have an insight into: the sorts of feelings parents are experiencing following the loss, the types of funeral they may find most beneficial, and the levels of knowledge they possess about what they can and cannot do at their baby's funeral. To explore these issues, as part of the Death before Birth project¹, we interviewed 35 people who had experienced a pregnancy loss and, among other things, asked them about: how they felt following the loss, their experience of organising the funeral, the kind of funeral they had chosen for their child, the kind of funeral they would have *liked to have had* for their child, and their experience of communication with the funeral director.

Here we report some of our findings, which we believe may be of interest to funeral directors who are helping parents to organise an appropriate funeral for their baby. We share what parents said about their experiences before, during, and after the funeral. In each case, we discuss the implications of our findings for funeral directors and explore how directors might best support bereaved parents through the process of organising a funeral following a pregnancy loss.

1. Before the funeral: uncertainty about what kind of funeral to have and what kind of funeral they are allowed to have

To begin with, it is important to note that some parents who had experienced a stillbirth (i.e. a post 24-week loss) were not aware that they had to have a funeral, but when they found out that they did, many (though not all) were keen to organise it themselves and not have the hospital do it. Many of these parents found that when they began to organise the funeral they were largely unaware of the options available concerning the kind of funeral they could have. They did not know, for example, if they could bury their baby outside a cemetery, if they could put objects in their baby's coffin, or if they could choose an outfit for their baby to wear for the funeral. It is therefore important for funeral directors to make parents aware of the wide range of options that are available to them, and to spend time discussing the different ways in which they might tailor the funeral to their needs.

Providing careful explanations of the available options is particularly important given that during the period immediately following the loss, many parents report, understandably, that they are not in the right frame of mind to make decisions. Indeed, many of the parents we spoke to said that they had welcomed suggestions from funeral directors as to what they might do because they were not in a good position to come up with their own ideas. Many parents who we spoke to felt that they needed more 'space' or time before having to deal with questions relating to a funeral. Some parents articulated a transitional period between initially thinking of the baby as a 'dead baby' to then being able to think of them as their son or daughter, that is, as a 'person'. This sometimes affected how they made decisions for the funeral in the initial stages, and then how they felt about those decisions afterwards:

I... just wasn't prepared for it. I didn't realise they were, kind of, questions I'd have to answer. And didn't really have answers to them at the time because I didn't know what I wanted done with him. I didn't know anything. But I think that if someone'd said to me at the time, 'these are your memories. These are the only memories you're ever going to have of your son ... and you need to really think about this as, like, he's your son' ... And I don't think that's how I was thinking. I was thinking of him at the time as a dead baby that needed dealing with, as opposed to, 'this is my son and I need to do right by him'. (A woman who experienced stillbirth)

More broadly speaking, many parents appear to go through an internal conflict between wanting not to think about the funeral, but at the same time worrying that they'll regret not doing things that don't feel right in the moment:

I hadn't realised how many decisions there were to make in it all...it's picking the reading and we've got this lovely book full of poems and readings but ... I just, I hated it. I hated it. I just wanted it to be over but then at the same time you then feel guilty that you're just sort of dismissing, and there're some really soppy poems that were just really lovely but I'm thinking, God, we can't have this. It's just, that's too much, you know? But then you feel guilty because you're like, oh, you know, we are...not addressing our emotions enough (A woman who experienced stillbirth)

Sometimes this internal conflict results in parents realising too late that they wanted things that they had not thought about at the time. One of the parents in our study reported realising at the last minute that she wanted flowers for her baby's funeral, and having to cast around for flowers on a Sunday, when all the shops were closed. In another case, parents regretted not being offered the chance to do things such as take a photo of their baby.

In terms of timing, some of the parents we interviewed did not want to wait too long for the funeral, whereas others valued the time they spent with their baby's body, getting to know their baby, before the funeral. This was a valuable time for them to spend 'parenting' their child, perhaps giving them a teddy to cuddle, showing them their room, introducing them to siblings. For many parents this time was very important as it allowed them to develop memories that would be very precious to them at a later date. The days immediately preceding the funeral can be the hardest for parents; as one mother, who had experienced a termination following a diagnosis of foetal abnormality, commented:

We were just really happy, and it was good that we had her for nine days but as we got nearer to the funeral that's when I really start to lose the plot 'cos I was thinking they are gonna take her off me and was more worried about the fact that she was gonna be taken off me.

For funeral directors, it is important to be aware that parents may feel particularly fragile as the funeral itself approaches, and they may wish to change plans that were made earlier on in the process.

2. Planning and conducting the funeral itself

We found that parents frequently wanted to personalise the service in some way, perhaps by reading a nursery rhyme or by carrying the baby themselves. Many of the parents we spoke to had put an object in the coffin, such as a teddy bear, and then retain a similar object for themselves. Others had wanted their baby to be wearing particular clothes. Some parents wanted to put numerous items in the coffin but were not sure what the procedures were and whether they were allowed to do so.

With respect to ‘memory making’, certain connotations or imagery, such as Angels, can be both appealing but also problematic for the bereaved. Although many parents reported finding religious imagery helpful, this was not always the case, as one woman comments:

I don't really buy into the whole angel baby thing though. It just - to me it's mawkish. It doesn't fit with my value system. So I didn't like all the angel stuff (A woman who experienced a miscarriage).

In terms of the size of the funeral, some of the parents reported only wanting a small funeral, as they felt a large funeral would be stressful, but others later regretted not having had a larger funeral, since in retrospect they felt that they had not acknowledged their baby's existence sufficiently well.

We encountered mixed views regarding the choice of burial or cremation. Some parents reported preferring a cremation rather than burial to avoid having a ‘place’ they would subsequently be obliged to visit:

At the time you just have this outpouring, I need to *do* something, what do I *do* with all this *energy*? But we were very careful not to do too much too soon and burden ourselves with these false memories (A woman who experienced a stillbirth).

A person's religious beliefs may change because of the experience, and even though someone is of a particular faith does not always mean they want this reflected in the service. One mother reported that although she was a Christian, she felt ‘very upset with God’ and that she therefore wanted a Humanist funeral instead.

When organising a funeral for a baby that has died, it is important to bear in mind that many parents will continue to have strong parenting impulses towards their baby and this will influence their feelings about the funeral. Many of the parents we interviewed wanted to emphasise, or to find a way of recognising, that their baby was a ‘person,’ that he or she was ‘real’:

We put up on the big screen in the church - we put a picture of his coffin up, and that wasn't to upset people at all because we'd ummed and ahed about doing photos...it was just to make people realise it's real...because you can go and just see flowers and ‘oh we're so sorry’...everyone came out saying it was the coffin that got them...they realise actually what we had. It was almost a little eye-opener into what we'd gone through, and not for our sake, but just to realise we want him to be a person...and that he's- he was alive, and that there he was, and he has a place. So that was, um...literally you could hear people gasp when they walk in ...they weren't ready for that I don't think... (A woman who experienced stillbirth).

For many parents there was a feeling that on some level their baby was still alive and needed caring for after they had died. For example, one set of parents requested that the baby might be buried with a grandparent who had passed, while another asked if the baby could be cremated with a teddy bear.

3. After the funeral: the ashes and mementos

Many of the parents who we interviewed emphasised the importance of mementos after the funeral had taken place. It is important for funeral providers to be aware that items that have been in close contact with the baby can be incredibly important for parents – such as blankets that they had been wrapped in. Families may want these items returned unwashed.

The ashes can be important for people, in particular if they don't know if they will be living in the same place forever. One mother reported that she did not want a burial as they were moving away because of her job. The fact that they had had a cremation allowed her to take the ashes with her. Some parents who had experienced miscarriages or terminations following a diagnosis of foetal abnormality were concerned that their baby was so small that no ashes would be returned to them. For them it was important to learn that there would always be ashes, even following a miscarriage. In some cases, parents reported that they had retained some of the ashes for themselves while scattering others. This way they were able to maintain physical contact with their baby whilst also having a ceremony that allowed them to memorialise their baby.

After the funeral, some parents reported that they found condolences, such as cards and flowers, upsetting. One mother reported that she received so many bouquets of flowers that she felt that her house started to resemble a funeral home. When the flowers began to die, it reminded her of death once again and she had to deal with piles and piles of dead flowers. She reported that she would have preferred to receive food instead.

The implications here are that it is important for funeral directors to explain carefully about the availability of ashes and perhaps play a role in communicating with other family members about the parents' specific wishes following the funeral.

Conclusion

The findings from our study indicate that parents who have suffered a pregnancy loss often experience considerable internal conflict, which means that funeral directors need to give them time, both in discussing the various options that are available and then giving parents sufficient time to reflect on these options. Parents may need to go away and reflect on what it is they would like to do. In order to help them with this, it may be useful to provide both oral and written information on the available options. Funeral directors also need to be prepared for the fact that parents may well change their minds during the process, and take a corresponding flexible approach. It is important to consider that for many parents, the baby's body is still 'a baby that needs to be cared for' regardless of gestational age, and to take account of this when talking about the baby, when making plans for the funeral, when handling the baby, and when working with funereal artefacts. It is important to remember that parents are likely to vary considerably in terms of the types of funeral that they choose, and that one must not make assumptions about religious beliefs or other contextual variables that shape the choices that parents make. After the funeral, it may be important for the parents to take home a memento of their baby, preferably an object that has been in physical contact with the baby. If the baby is cremated, parents appreciate clarity and flexibility regarding the return of their baby's ashes following the ceremony.

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