Spiritual and pastoral care following stillbirth:
A review of services in Ireland

Nuzum D, Meaney S, O’Donoghue K
Pregnancy Loss Research Group
Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, University College Cork,
Cork University Maternity Hospital, Ireland
Perinatal bereavement is recognised as one of the most difficult bereavements for parents with life-lasting impact.
Background

- 69,146 births in 2013
- 301 Stillbirths
  - 4.4 per 1,000 births
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Stillbirth rate per 1,000 births</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malta</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxembourg</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Stillbirth rate per 1,000 births (≥1000g birthweight or ≥28 completed weeks gestation)
What is stillbirth?

Stillbirth

‘... a child born weighing 500 grammes or more or having a gestational age of 24 weeks or more who shows no sign of life.’

Stillbirths Registration Act, 1994
Aims of study

- To evaluate the level of spiritual and pastoral care that is provided following stillbirth in Ireland
- To identify what chaplains consider to be the greatest spiritual and pastoral challenges for bereaved parents
Methodology

- Ethical approval from Clinical Research Ethics Committee of the Cork Teaching Hospitals

- Semi-structured Interviews in 2012 with Healthcare Chaplains (n=20) from Maternity Facilities in Ireland (n=17)

- Analysis of key themes relating to spiritual and pastoral issues surrounding stillbirth for chaplains

- First study of its kind in Ireland
Methodology

Thematic Analysis

- Familiarisation with the data
- Generating initial codes
- Searching for themes
- Reviewing themes
- Defining and naming themes
- Producing the report

Braun & Clarke, 2006
Results: Services provided

- All facilities provide pastoral care for families following stillbirth
- Only the three largest facilities have chaplains working exclusively in maternity environment
- Pastoral care at co-located maternity facilities is provided as part of overall ministry
Results: Provision of symbol

n=17 facilities

- 15 Blessing Cert
- 8 Candle
- 2 Neither
Results: profile of chaplains

Work/ministry profile of chaplains n=20

- 14 Co-Located
- 4 Exclusively Maternity
- 2 Combined with parish
Results: profile of chaplains

- Male: 11
- Female: 9
- Non-Certified: 8
- Certified: 12
- Roman Catholic: 17
- Anglican: 3
- Ordained/Religious: 14
- Lay: 6
Results: Chaplains

- 9/20 chaplains had experienced stillbirth or pregnancy loss in their close family circle
- 8/20 chaplains are parents
- 11/20 chaplains provide follow up care for bereaved parents
Results: Chaplains’ awareness of stillbirth facts

- 6: Able to define stillbirth
- 9: Know how many stillbirths in unit per year
- 7: Know how many births in unit per year
Results: themes

- Perception of role
- Suffering
- Doubt
- Presence
ROLE
- Not trained
- Isolation
- Fear
- Vocation
- Team

SUFFERING
- Limbo
- Salvation
- Anger
- Emptiness
- Parental guilt

Doubt
- Inner faith conflict
- Bewilderment
- Abandonment
- Why?

PRESENCE
- Silence
- Incarnation
- ‘Being with’
- Prayer
- Compassion

Baptismal Rules
Results: Perception of role

- Most chaplains (n=16) see their role as being primarily pastoral
- 3 chaplains saw their role as mainly a ceremonial one
- 1 Chaplain saw their role as both ceremonial and pastoral
All chaplains provide care for people of all faiths and none:
  - 4 ‘feel nervous’ about this

1 chaplain has received specialist perinatal bereavement Training
  - (RTS Program)

13 saw themselves as part of the Multidisciplinary Team
A dominant theme across the data
- Suffering of parents and suffering experienced by chaplains

“They’re just totally distraught ... helpless ... They are expecting a child and there’d be all sorts of dreams and then all of a sudden it is decimated”

“Sometimes you wish you were made of stone ... I broke down in the chapel ... I’m just like everyone else”
Results: Doubt

- 16/20 chaplains expressed that stillbirth is a challenge to their faith.

“seeing devastation like that ... my faith has been challenged ... from time to time I have turned my back, I couldn’t go into a chapel, I stopped attending Mass I did, I just couldn’t ... yet again I had to provide pastoral care ...but not believing that it was real for a while... I wasn’t believing what I was preaching if you like”

“every time there’s a stillborn birth my heart misses a beat because its a challenge to my faith...”
Results: Presence

- All chaplains identified ‘presence’ as the primary way they meet the spiritual needs of bereaved parents.
- This was expressed by phrases such as

  “It's a scene, a scene of ... of utter emptiness”

  “I just sat beside her and put my arm around her”
Results: How do chaplains assess spiritual need?

- All chaplains use their professional intuition and pastoral skill to identify spiritual need
- No chaplain currently uses a spiritual assessment tool
- 13 felt a spiritual assessment tool would be useful
Spiritual impact of Stillbirth

- All chaplains recognised stillbirth as being a devastating experience for parents

- Chaplains used the following words to describe the spiritual impact of stillbirth
sadness, struggle, devastation, brokenness, abandonment, loss, pain, suffering, shattered, isolation, helplessness, limbo, raw, distressed, angry, shocked, frightening, difficult, the big ‘why’, guilt, punished, distraught, emptiness ‘where is God?’, outraged, seething, nightmare, robbed, stunned, ‘How could this happen?’ ‘I don’t deserve this’...
Conclusions

• 95% of chaplains have received no formal training in this area

• All chaplains recognised that stillbirth is a devastating experience

• Stillbirth is a challenge to faith for most chaplains

• There is a wide diversity of practice and provision of pastoral care
Recommendations

• Specialist training in perinatal bereavement should be provided for Healthcare chaplains

• The use of theological reflection and reflective practice to improve resilience and staff wellbeing

• Greater harmonisation for provision of consistent pastoral care across all units
  • New National Perinatal Bereavement Standards (2016) has included spiritual care
Thank you

- Participating chaplains
- Dr Keelin O’Donoghue
- Pregnancy Loss Team, Cork University Maternity Hospital