

MY JOURNEY TO BECOMING A BEREAVEMENT MIDWIFE

by ELIZA STRAUSS, Bereavement Midwife

I HAVE always been comfortable with death and dying. I have been a Nurse and Midwife for over 30 years and I have always accepted it as part of my role whether caring for sick cancer patients, the elderly, or caring for babies who I know will die. With life comes death and as challenging as it is, I accept it can happen at any point and at any age. As a society however, we don't do death well! This is particularly true for babies who die.

When I started caring for families following the death of their baby after a miscarriage, stillbirth or newborn death, I felt dissatisfied in the care I was providing to these families. I felt ill-equipped and unsure and every time I saw a mother and her partner leave the hospital, I would walk away wondering "where to from here? ... what support will they get? ... will they be ok?!". To me it was unacceptable that these parents were walking out of our hospital doors without the necessary tools to support them further in their grief journey and so I decided to do something about it.

For me the answer was in education. I decided to educate myself to better care for these families. I researched for months for places who would be able to better equip me with the necessary skills and knowledge around grief and loss. Sadly, there wasn't much out there in terms of perinatal loss training, however I found a wonderful institution where I gained a qualification in (General) Bereavement Counselling, and decided I would adapt what I had learnt, to the families I would care for in a perinatal loss setting. I learned so much and was so pleased to feel my confidence growing, knowing that I could return to my workplace and implement what I had learned.

Instead of feeling helpless and hopeless and not knowing what to say or do when caring for a perinatally bereaved family, I found on the back of my bereavement training, I could easily apply the grief theories and models and counselling skills I had learned, and I finally felt (after 20 years), that I was making a difference to these families after one of the most tragic types of loss one can experience ... the death of a baby.

Education & Training in Perinatal Loss

The next challenge I set myself, was to educate others around me. It is clear the impact that both positive and negative care can have on bereaved parents and I believe with the proper training, the negative consequences can be minimised to soften the trauma these parents experience. I wanted to educate other health care professionals to better equip them with the



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tools necessary to care for these vulnerable families at this devastating time in their lives.

With my new title of 'Bereavement Midwife', midwives and nurses started to tell me how challenging they found this specialty field of health care and they were asking me for training. As a result of this feedback, I started running perinatal loss education days as I figured, if I can share what I have learned from my training and experience with bereaved families, I would be able to help others feel more confident when they were faced with caring for a family after a pregnancy loss or following the death of their baby.

A Bereavement Support Program

Education was and is a big part of my plan but I also wanted to set up a structured program whereby staff would have clear policies and processes to guide them to deliver respectful and supportive care to all the bereaved parents and their families walking through our doors. In 2013, I set up a Bereavement Support Program at my workplace, which has turned out to be a well-oiled wheel and I consistently receive overwhelming positive

feedback from the families as well as the midwives, nurses, and doctors who care for them.

I believe every family should receive best practice, quality bereavement care at every point in the painful trajectory of loss and grief. Therefore, the bereavement care we provide starts the minute a diagnosis has been made, through to the labour and birth or cesarean section, right through to discharge and after-care once the family is home. Support in a subsequent pregnancy after loss is also essential.

Setting up The Perinatal Loss Centre

Once I felt happy with what I had set up at my workplace, I decided to take it further afield to reach out to other health professionals who might also gain from my knowledge and what has now become my expertise. In 2018, I set up **The Perinatal Loss Centre**, an organisation dedicated to supporting families and health care professionals working with bereaved families affected by perinatal loss. This is a collaboration with Dr Renee Miller, Perinatal Psychologist, and Anita Guyett, Bereaved Parent and ex General Manager of Bereavement Care, SANDS.

I don't like to think negatively and I have always enjoyed a challenge! It has been a rewarding path in becoming a **Bereavement Midwife** and setting up a **Bereavement Support Program** as well as developing my **online training program**, but I have had to remind myself of a few things. Not everyone is comfortable with perinatal loss and not everyone wants to learn about it! Some midwives even tell me they find it such a challenging area of health care that they prefer to not care for these families. My additional challenge has therefore been to support those staff members who are impacted negatively by this area.

Working in this field is tough but it can also be rewarding and not many people can imagine that. I have found that having self-care strategies in place and recognising when I am neglecting my own self care is paramount. Thankfully, I have great support from the hospital I work in and from my colleagues who believe in me and support me 100% in my role.

I encourage anyone interested in this specialty field to reach out and give it a go. You may surprise yourself!

I cherish what these families have taught me and remember them and their babies always.



THE
PERINATAL LOSS
CENTRE

The Perinatal Loss Centre offers

Online training – 'Perinatal Loss in Practice: What Hospital Staff Need to Know'

Consultation to maternity hospitals on how to set up or enhance their existing bereavement support program.

Face to face Perinatal Loss education & training – for Midwives, Nurses, Doctors.

Support to staff – mentoring & debriefing following perinatal loss.

www.theperinatallosscentre.com.au