For those bereaved longer ago

sands

Saving babies' lives.
Supporting bereaved families.

The use of language

We acknowledge that some of you may have had more than one baby who died at the same time but for ease of reading, throughout this book, we use the term "baby" rather than "babies" to apply to both an individual baby and to more than one baby.

We do not know whether your baby was a boy or girl, and not all parents know the gender of their babies who died. Therefore, we will use the terms "they/them" rather than "his/her".

When we use the term "mother", we are usually referring to the person who is/was pregnant. We use the term "mother" because it is the word that is most easily and commonly understood. In doing so we understand that not all birth parents would define themselves as a mother.

We recognise that parents who identify as transgender males or people who do not identify with the gender binary who are the birth parent may not prefer the term "mother". We also recognise that some surrogate birth parents choose not to identify as the mother. We refer to "mothers" rather than "women" as mothers may not always identify as women.

We also recognise the fact that there may be more than one mother involved. For example, for lesbian couples there will be the birth mother and her partner, or where surrogacy is being used, the birth mother and the mother/s who would be the legal guardian or parent.

For ease of reading, we use "partner" rather than "spouse or partner". We use this in the context of heterosexual and same sex relationships, and where couples may or may not be married. We acknowledge that not all cultures think of spouses as partners.

Second edition © Sands 2022

No part of this book may be reproduced in whole or part, in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means without the prior written permission of Sands. All rights reserved.

Whilst every care is taken providing information, please note that it is of a general nature and that readers should seek professional or expert advice as appropriate to their specific circumstance. Sands does not accept any liability, including liability for any error or omission.

All information is correct at the time of going to print: April 2024.

Contents

4 Introduction

6 How attitudes and practices have changed

12 Stillbirth, birth and death certificates

12 Tracing a baby's grave or record of cremation

12 Babies born before 28 or 24 weeks

13 Stillborn babies and babies who died after birth

14 Where to start

18 Ideas for commemorating your baby

22 Support

23 About Sands

24 UK National Register Offices

We are so sorry that your baby died

This may be the first time you have felt able to talk about your baby and to express your grief. You may want to discuss ways in which you could commemorate your baby, or to find out what happened to your baby's body. You may want to know that you are not alone and that others share your feelings.

Losing a baby around the time of birth is a major bereavement which can have a life-long impact on parents and their families. We are often contacted by parents whose baby died many years ago, and who now want to talk about what happened and how they feel. We are also contacted by surviving brothers and sisters and other family members who would like to find out more about the baby and about what happened at the time. This may be because the parents have asked them to find out, or because the parents have never felt able to talk about what happened and close family members now want to know.

It's normal for sadness and grief to re-emerge many years later. You may not have felt able to acknowledge what happened before now. Sometimes a TV or radio programme or an article can prompt a call. Sometimes it's a family event, such as the youngest child leaving home, the arrival of a grandchild, a serious illness, or another death. And sometimes parents feel a need to call us out of the blue and for no obvious reason.

We welcome all calls and emails from anyone who is affected by a baby's death, however long ago it happened, and we hope that you will find this information helpful.

How attitudes and practices have changed

> **Don't you fret – you just concentrate on getting better. We'll take care of everything. What you haven't had you'll never miss. Just remember, dear, that you're so lucky. You have three wonderful children at home.**
>
> Advice given to a newly bereaved mother in 1978

It was only in the mid-1980s that the death of a baby around the time of birth began to be recognised as a major bereavement. Until then, a baby who was born dead at any gestation was swiftly removed from the labour ward: you may not have been given the opportunity to see or hold your baby.

> **When they rushed my baby out of the room,I assumed I'd given birth to a monster, something that was too awful to look at. That thought haunted me for many years. Now I realise that he probably looked perfect, just as if he was asleep.**
>
> Mum

You may have been sedated after the birth because it was thought that this would help you forget. There was a general belief, both amongst professionals and society as a whole, that it was best to carry on as though nothing had happened. You may have been discouraged from talking about or remembering your baby and discouraged from expressing grief.

> **When we wanted to talk about how we felt or express our grief, we were told not to dwell on things. So we just had to bottle them up and try to get on with our lives**
>
> Mum

As part of a couple in the 1970s, male partners may have been expected to be fairly detached from pregnancy and may have been excluded from the labour ward. It was only in the late 1960's and early 1970's that fathers began to stay with their partners during labour. Even then they were often tolerated, rather than welcomed as fathers with their own needs. When a baby died, the father's feelings were often ignored. He may have been expectedto be strong and self-contained, and to focus solely on supporting the mother. Bereaved fathers were often told to encourage their partner to forget the baby who had died and to have another baby as soon as possible.

> **Our baby daughters were stillborn in 1977, 1979 and 1981. My husband only 'came out' as a bereaved parent in 2007**
>
> Mum

In order to "protect" bereaved mothers, fathers were also often expected to take any decisions that had to be made. If, later on, there was regret about what was decided, many fathers felt responsible and blamed themselves.

Same sex parents were unlikely to be recognised as such, further isolating biological fathers and co-mothers.

All this meant that many parents grieved in silence. Few felt able to talk about what had happened or how they were feeling, even to each other, let alone to their closest family and friends. For some couples, this led to the end of their relationship. Many parents felt completely isolated; they worried that their feelings and reactions and continuing sadness were unacceptable and abnormal.

> **We were treated as if something was wrong with us. But we were just grieving.**
>
> Mum

For mothers giving birth on their own, or for separated couples, the isolation and lack of support may have been made worse by societal or cultural attitudes.

You may not have given your baby a name, either because nobody suggested it or because you were not told whether your baby was a boy or a girl. Most parents didn't know what happened to their baby's body and didn't feel able to ask. Babies who died before 28 completed weeks of pregnancy (changed to 24 weeks in 1992) could not be legally registered: parents had no proof that their babies had ever existed. Even when babies were registered, many parents were not given a certificate.

Due to the work of Sands and other organisations, attitudes and practices when a baby died before or around the time of birth gradually began to change.

> **We were given some photos of our first daughter but there wasn't one that I felt I wanted to show people. When our second daughter was stillborn I made my husband take a more 'natural' photo of me holding her, and I have this on show in a little silver frame, nestled amongst photos of my other children. But I still wish with all my heart that we had their hand and footprints – even all these years later.**
>
> Mum

Nowadays, health professionals are far more aware of the impact of the death of a baby. Parents are offered opportunities to see and hold their baby, to name him or her, to collect keepsakes such as hand and foot prints and identity bracelets, and to make their own decisions about funeral arrangements and memorials.

> **We did see and hold our two daughters who were stillborn in 1986 and 1991, and I can't thank the midwives enough for their sensitive and supportive care.**

Since 1992, babies who are stillborn after 24 completed weeks of pregnancy have been registered, so more parents have a certificate to provide official recognition of their baby's existence. And when a baby is born dead before 24 weeks, the parents are sometimes offered a certificate by the hospital or a certificate produced by Sands (details on page 23). Increasingly, people in wider society also recognise that the death of a baby before or around the time of birth is a major bereavement and has life-long consequences.

Although it can be comforting to know that things have generally changed for the better, this doesn't remove the pain of those parents whose care was poor and insensitive. Memories of things that were said, done, or not done may still be with you decades later.

> When I got home after my baby died, I rang my GP's surgery to ask for a home visit. The receptionist said, 'The GP will only visit you if you've got a baby'. The midwife did call round, but she didn't have time to listen and just said, 'I've got mothers with babies to see
>
> Mum

Some parents feel guilty that they did not somehow do more for their baby, or make different decisions. If you feel like this, it's important to remember that you were doing your best in traumatic circumstances, in a state of shock and grief, maybe with little support or information.

Although nothing can change the past, Sands is here to support you if you would like to talk or write about your baby. There are things that you and your family can do now commemorate a baby who died long ago. Below, we explain how you may be able to trace a baby's grave or record of cremation if you to try to want to find out what happened to the baby's body. We also describe some other things that you might like to do.

Stillbirth, birth and death certificates

If your baby was registered as a stillbirth, or a birth and then a death, but you don't have a certificate, you can apply for a certificate now from your national Register Office (see page 23 for contact details).

Tracing a baby's grave or record of cremation

It was only in the mid-1980s that the parents of a baby who died began to be consulted about funeral arrangements for their baby. Before then, parents were not usually involved and you may not have been told what had happened to your baby's body. We understand that it can be very important to try to find out, not just for parents, but also for surviving brothers and sisters.

However, please bear in mind that it may not be easy and that, sometimes, a search will not be successful.

Babies born before 28 or 24 weeks

Sadly, if your baby was born dead before 1992 and before 28 completed weeks of pregnancy, there will probably be no record of his or her birth, or of burial or cremation. Until 1992, the legal definition of stillbirth was a baby born dead after 28 completed weeks of pregnancy. In 1992, the legal definition was changed to 24 completed weeks. All babies born dead before the legal age of stillbirth are considered in law to be "miscarriages". Their birth cannot be registered and the law does not require them to be formally buried or cremated, so cemeteries and crematoria have never been required to keep records of these babies.

In recent years, with greater understanding of the significance of the death of a baby at any stage of pregnancy, more babies born before 24 weeks have been formally buried or cremated. Proper records are more likely to have been kept for some of these babies. In some parts of the UK official pregnancy and baby loss certificates are available for babies born before 24 weeks. Details of how to apply are on p25. Sands can also provide certificates with your baby's details here, whether or not you are eligible for any other certification **(shop.sands.org.uk/en/products/bereavement-support)**

Stillborn babies and babies who died after birth

Even though stillborn babies and those who died after birth were registered, it can still be difficult to trace the cemetery or crematorium where the baby was buried or cremated, especially if this happened a long time ago. For example, the hospital where the baby was born may have closed, records may have been lost or destroyed, or, if a funeral director was involved, the firm may no longer be in business.

However, cemeteries and crematoria have always been required by law to keep permanent records of these babies. So if you can identify the cemetery or crematorium, you should be able to find out where the baby's body was buried or the ashes were buried or scattered.

Please note: family members making enquiries on behalf of a parent who is alive will usually need to show a letter of authority from their parent to anyone they contact during their enquiry.

Where to start

You could start by contacting the Bereavement Office of the hospital where your baby was born or died. You will need to tell them:

- the full name and address of the mother at the time of the baby's birth
- the date of the baby's birth
- any other information that you may have, such as the stage the pregnancy had reached

If the hospital does not have a Bereavement Office, you could try contacting the General Office or the chaplain. If the hospital still has the relevant records for that year, the staff may be able to tell you if your baby was buried or cremated, and possibly the address of the cemetery or crematorium.

Alternatively, the staff may be able to give you the name of the funeral director who made the arrangements. If the funeral director is still in business and still has records from that time, his or her staff should be able to tell you the name of the cemetery or crematorium. You can then contact the cemetery or crematorium staff and ask them to carry out a search of their registers.

However, hospitals don't keep medical records of births indefinitely, and some hospital records may not contain enough detail to be helpful. If the hospital where the baby was born has closed, records may have been transferred to the nearest large hospital, or sometimes destroyed.

If neither the hospital nor the funeral director has a record of the cemetery or crematorium

You will need to contact local cemeteries and crematoria yourself. Start with those nearest to the hospital where your baby was stillborn or died. If you cannot find any record of your baby at the nearest cemetery or crematorium, the staff there may be able to suggest where else you could ask.

You may find the following website useful in finding cemeteries and crematoria in your area:
www.iccm-uk.com

Some cemeteries and crematoria are run by the local council. The council may have a Bereavement Services Department, and the staff there may be able to help or advise you.

By law, anyone can inspect a burial register. However, cremation law only permits the inspection of cremation records at the discretion of the crematorium as there may be data protection issues. (This is because there may be information in the records about people who are still alive). If you are not able to see the cremation records yourself, the crematorium staff will search on your behalf if you provide the following information:

- the baby's surname
- the date of the death or stillbirth.

You may find it helpful to keep a record of your search, including a list of the places you have contacted and the names and contact details of the people you spoke to.

If you find the cemetery or crematorium

If the baby was buried

In many places, stillborn babies were buried in a shared grave with other babies. This is still the practice in some cemeteries. Shared graves are not usually marked, though they do have a plot number and can be located on a cemetery plan. Sometimes a baby was buried in a grave with an adult.

Finding the place where a baby is buried can be bittersweet, or it can be a relief. It can also feel upsetting, even if the baby has his or her own grave. Sometimes babies were buried in a less attractive part of a cemetery, and some graves may not have been well looked after.

If the baby was cremated

In the past, several babies were sometimes cremated together. This still happens when a hospital arranges funerals for very premature babies. Until recently, ashes were not usually offered to parents following a shared cremation: they were generally scattered or buried, often in a little used area of the crematorium gardens. The crematorium should have a record of where the ashes from a shared cremation were scattered or buried. However, there is unlikely to be a plaque or any formal recognition of the importance of these areas.

You can make an appointment to be shown the exact location of the grave, or the area where the ashes were scattered or buried. Most cemetery and crematoria staff are very helpful and will give you as much information and help as they can. Most cemeteries and crematoria can provide a certified extract from a burial or cremation register.

If you decide to visit the place where your baby was cremated or buried, you may want to take photographs. However, you may find that there are restrictions on what can be placed on a grave, especially if it's a shared grave. In a crematorium, there may be restrictions on what can be placed in an area where ashes from several babies were scattered or buried. The staff will tell you what is allowed.

You may want to ask to have your baby's name inscribed in the cemetery or crematorium memorial book or ask if you can plant a tree or trees in their memory. If this is not possible at the place where your baby is buried The Woodland Trust have memorial woodlands – more information below

Ideas for commemorating your baby

It's never too late to commemorate your baby. You may wish to name your baby if you haven't felt that you could before now, order a certificate from Sands, arrange a ceremony, attend a Remembrance event, or plant a tree...

Arrange a ceremony to commemorate your baby

You might want to have a ceremony of your own to honour, or perhaps to name your baby. You can create something with special relevance to you and your family. For example, you could scatter flower petals on water or light candles at a place with special meaning for you. You might want to ask family members or close friends to do this with you, and you could ask someone to recite a favourite poem or sing a special song.

If you prefer a faith-based ceremony, you may wish to contact your local place of worship and arrange prayers. Alternatively you could contact the Institute of Civil Funerals (www.iocf.org.uk) or search the internet for an independent celebrant who will help you plan a non-religious service or a service with some religious or spiritual content. These days it is much more widely accepted that the death of a baby needs to be acknowledged in the same way as the death of an older child or an adult.

Plant a tree

You could explore the possibility of planting or dedicating a tree either in your own or a friend's garden or local park, the Woodland Trust **(www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/support-us/give/dedications)**, or National Trust.

Visit a memorial garden

Sands has a garden at the National Memorial Arboretum in Alrewas in Staffordshire. This garden was established in 2000 and is dedicated to the memory of all babies who have died. It is a tranquil place where families can remember their own baby in beautiful and peaceful surroundings. There is a sculpture in the garden with the inscription "Remembered but un-named", for parents who were not given the opportunity to name their baby. The Arboretum is open every day except Christmas Day.

The paths within the Sands Garden are lined with stones or pebbles on which families have written their baby's name or a short message. If you would like to add your own stone, please use one that is no bigger than 7 centimetres in diameter and write on it or decorate it with indelible markers. Suitable stones and markers are available at the Arboretum.

You might also want to come to the Sands memorial service that is held each June at the National Memorial Arboretum. Information about this service is posted on our website each year in spring **(www.sands.org.uk).**

Some local cemeteries and crematoria have created memorial areas for babies and children who have died. Even if your baby is buried, or his or her ashes are scattered elsewhere, you may find it helpful to spend time in one of these quiet places.

There are several Sands memorial gardens around the UK (www.sands.org.uk/garden-day).

Our Helpline **(0808 164 3332)** or **(helpline@sands.org.uk)** can tell you if there is one near you and can give you the contact details.

Come to a Sands Lights of Love service

Sands holds Lights of Love services in December every year around the UK. The dates and venues for each year's Lights of Love services are announced on the Sands website in the autumn.

You could also go to a hospital memorial service. Many hospitals organise an annual non-denominational memorial service for babies who have died. You can contact the chaplains at the hospital where your baby died, or at a hospital that is close to where you live, to find out when their service will be held. Some crematoria also hold annual memorial services.

Memorial services can be quite emotional, so you may want to ask a close family member or friend to go with you or to meet you afterwards. You could also let the people who are organising or leading the service know that you might be coming, so that they can look out for you.

Baby Loss Awareness Week

Baby Loss Awareness Week is held every year between 9-15 October and ends with the international Wave of Light at 7pm on 15 October for parents to remember their baby at the same time as others across the world. More information is available at **www.babyloss-awareness.org.**

Other things you might like to do

- If your baby's stillbirth or birth and death were registered and you don't have a certificate, you can contact the register office in the UK country where the baby was born to ask for one, or order one from Sands
- Light a special candle for your baby on the anniversary of his or her birth, at festivals or at family gatherings.
- Write a letter or letters to your baby. You could write about what happened, the hopes you have, any siblings and family who know about your baby.
- Have something made with your baby's name on.
- Add your baby on to your family tree.
- Make a donation in memory of your baby to help to support bereaved parents, to ensure that the care they receive is a good as it can possibly be and to promote research to find out why babies die. Sands has a range of sporting and other events which you would be welcome to join or support. Donations to Sands enable us to continue our vital work.

To find out more,
please visit our website **sands.org.uk,**
email **fundraising@sands.org.uk** or call **020 7436 7940**

Support

We hope that you have found this booklet helpful. If you would like to talk about any of the things discussed in it, please contact the Sands Helpline on

0808 164 3332 | helpline@sands.org.uk

We offer support to anyone affected by the death of a baby, however long ago the baby died.

About Sands

Sands is the leading stillbirth and neonatal death charity in the UK. Founded in 1978, Sands exists to reduce the number of babies dying and to ensure that anyone affected by the death of a baby receives the best possible care and support for as long as they need it wherever they are in the UK.

Sands strives to reduce the number of babies dying and to better understand the causes of baby deaths, working with governments and other organisations to drive change and raise awareness of the issues relating to baby loss.

Sands exists to support anyone affected by the death of a baby, before, during or shortly after birth. Sands provides bereavement support services at both a local and national level. These include the Sands Freephone helpline, mobile app, online community, family support packs, memory boxes and over 100 regional support groups run by trained befrienders.

Sands works to improve bereavement care available to parents and families, by offering a range of training programmes and resources and working in partnership with health care professionals, trusts and health boards.

UK National Register Offices

Obtaining a birth or death certificate

You can order a copy of a birth or death certificate from the General Register Office in the country where the event took place. You can order by post, by telephone or online. Certificates cost £11 (2024 prices).

Obtaining a stillbirth certificate

The UK General Register Office's policy states:

"Due to the sensitive nature of stillbirth registrations, the procedure for ordering a certificate of the entry differs from other types of [birth and death] certificates. We will only send out the application form after we have been contacted by phone or in writing by the mother or father (if he is named on the certificate). In cases where the parents are deceased, a brother or sister can apply if they can provide their parents' dates of death."

General Register Office (England and Wales)

www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/
General Register Office
PO Box 2, Southport PR8 2JD
Tel: 0300 123 1837
Email: certificate.services@gro.gov.uk
Include "GQ" in the email Subject

The National Records of Scotland

www.gov.uk/national-records-of-scotland
For the online contact form
New Register House
3 West Register Street, Edinburgh EH1 3YT
Tel: 0131 314 4411

Obtaining a pregnancy or baby loss certificate

In Scotland it has been possible since 2023 to apply for babies' names to be entered in the Memorial Book of Pregnancy and Baby Loss Prior to 24 Weeks which is held by the National Records of Scotland, and to receive a commemorative certificate. There are no time restrictions on this. England and Northern Ireland also have official baby loss certificates. The Welsh government has not yet introduced baby loss certificates.

Applications are made online

In Scotland
Memorial Book of Pregnancy and Baby Loss Prior to 24 Weeks | National Records of Scotland **(nrscotland.gov.uk)**

In England
Request a baby loss certificate - GOV.UK **(www.gov.uk)**

In Northern Ireland
Baby Loss Certificate Scheme for Northern Ireland **(nidirect.gov.uk/services/baby-loss-certificate-scheme-northern-ireland)**

General Register Office for Northern Ireland

www.nidirect.gov.uk/general-register-office-for-northern-ireland
Oxford House
49 - 55 Chichester Street, Belfast BT1 4HL
Tel: 0300 200 7890 (from other UK countries: 028 9151 3101)
Email: gro.nisra@dfpni.gov.uk

Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management

Develops and promotes best practice in cemeteries and crematoria.
www.iccm-uk.com
Tel: 020 8989 4661
Email: info@iccm-uk.com

Institute of Civil Funerals

Lists accredited civil funeral celebrants who will accommodate people's wishes, beliefs and values, whether religious or non-religious.
www.iocf.org.uk
Tel: 01480 861 411 (10 to 2, Mon to Fri)
Email: info@iocf.org.uk

Brief Lives Remembered

www.brieflives-remembered.co.uk

For the online contact form

Sands supports anyone affected by pregnancy loss or the death of a baby, and works to improve bereavement care and maternity safety.

General enquiries
020 7436 7940
www.sands.org.uk

Support
0808 164 3332
helpline@sands.org.uk

Postal address
Sands
10-18 Union Street,
London, SE1 1SZ

Sands Online Community
www.sands.community

sands

Registered with FUNDRAISING REGULATOR

Sands. Charity Registered in Scotland SC042789, England and Wales 299679. We also operate in Northern Ireland. Company Limited by Guarantee Number: 2212082. Registered Address: 10-18 Union Street, London, SE1 1SZ.