

Care at the Hospital

When pregnancy losses occur in a hospital with compassionate and well-trained staff, bereaved parents are supported as they struggle to cope and begin to grieve. The editors asked two of the pioneering New York City area hospitals to describe their programs. Below we present brief excerpts from longer articles which can be found on our website, www.ncjh.org.

Experiencing a pregnancy or infant loss in a hospital setting can be upsetting for a patient and her family members, all of whom may feel disconnected and removed from the emotional and psychological impact of their tragedy.

At **North Shore University Hospital**, the Pregnancy and Infant Loss Support Program has long recognized the importance of providing both rituals and tangible mementos to mark the significance of a baby's death and create memories for the bereaved family. Many hospitals, including North Shore, offer memory boxes, pictures, and locket of hair, as well as footprints and handprints. Our staff has also assisted families in making burial or cremation arrangements, and in planning a memorial service or a baby-naming ceremony. In addition, we have held two annual events at our hospital -- one in the fall and one in the spring--both of which our families tell us help them validate their losses and honor the memories of their babies.

The fall event is a non-denominational Babies' Memorial Service with a keynote speaker who is an expert in pregnancy and infant loss. During the Service, a harpist provides music while staff read poetry and remembrances. One of the most moving portions of the Service occurs when a member of our staff recites each baby's name and family members respond by approaching the stage to light an electric candle in memory of their baby. Any pregnancy or infant loss may be acknowledged during the candle lighting, regardless of the length of the pregnancy or if the loss occurred at home or in another hospital. The program concludes outside in the Babies' Memorial Garden where we gather to dedicate inscribed bricks and plant bulbs in the babies' memory.

The Memorial Garden was established with administrative backing in the mid 1990s. After the Garden had been planted, we heard from bereaved parents that despite the comfort

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the flowers and shrubs provided, they still did not have a tangible place to see their babies' names. That's when we added the beautiful decorative path with engraved bricks that include babies' names, dates of their births or deaths, and two little footprints. Our families now receive information about ordering a memorial brick for a nominal fee at the time of their loss. Some choose to place the brick immediately; others wait longer. A bereaved parent's loss does not have to be at North Shore Hospital in order to dedicate a brick in the Babies' Memorial Path. We have even dedicated bricks for women whose losses were over 50 years ago, but who never had the opportunity to honor or remember their babies. These women have learned about our program from relatives, friends or by reading newspaper articles.

Our second pregnancy loss event has taken place in the spring when we planned a day long educational program of workshops for professional caregivers and grieving parents on how to cope with pregnancy loss. Both families and caregivers have found the exchange of ideas a tremendous source of validation and comfort in their journey through grief. The bulbs which were planted in the fall were then in full bloom, and, again, we always concluded the day in the Babies' Memorial Garden with the placement of the newly dedicated bricks.

Despite the fact that the Babies' Memorial Garden and Path are situated just outside the visitors' parking lot of this busy hospital, parents tell us that they can "get lost" in the reverie of being there, and find comfort and solace while sitting on our comfortable brass benches. The Garden has not only become a place of peace and remembrance for bereaved families, but it also serves to educate passers-by who learn the significance of this sacred space when they, too, are drawn into its comforting presence.

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Beth Israel Medical Center's **Perinatal Bereavement Program**

Since the mid 1990s, Beth Israel Medical Center has provided comprehensive support and bereavement services for families who have experienced the loss of a baby through miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal death. We initiate care with a patient and her family at the time of her loss, we lead support groups for grieving parents, and we have created an annual Memorial Service which is open to any who are grieving the loss of a baby at any point during pregnancy, even if they have not been our patients. Special services are also provided for patients who need support during a pregnancy which follows a loss.

One unique and inspiring program is our annual Memorial Service, held in October to coincide with National Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Month. This is a multidisciplinary effort, involving the Departments of Social Work, Obstetrics, Nursing, Pediatrics, Neonatology, Chaplaincy, Administration, and Music Therapy, and it provides a healing ritual for both patients and staff.

There are several components to the program and every year we strive to create a balance between familiar content and new material. Each Memorial Service begins with a keynote speaker who has been selected from authors, clergy, artists, social workers, and therapists with special knowledge about pregnancy loss. This frames the program and introduces families to the experience of grief and loss in the context of psychological healing and remembrance.

Hospital staff, including doctors, residents-in-training, midwives, nurses, social workers, clergy, and administrators all participate by leading program sections, reading poems, introducing speakers, and by sharing their personal and professional experiences with perinatal loss. During the Memorial Service, families often reconnect with staff members who cared for them at the time of their loss. Although these reunions can be emotional, they are enormously gratifying for both the patients and their caregivers.

Music provides an important element of the Memorial Service with selections that move from somber and bittersweet emotions to feelings of hopefulness. We are fortunate to

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house the Louis Armstrong Center for Music Therapy whose musicians give generously of their time and talents. We recently began providing a CD of the Service music for people to take home with them after the program.

Two other rituals have become standards in the program—the Star Memorial and Candle Lighting. Each year families are invited to write the name of their baby on a silver oaktag star, which they place on a large, sky blue board. At each service we display the “star boards” from previous Memorial Services so our returning families realize that we remember them, too. We also provide a table with small votive candles for families to light, which ties in with an international program in support of loss called Worldwide Candle Lighting (www.compassionatefriends.org).

We offer a variety of readings including poetry, essays and letters, as well as selections written by family members and staff. Chaplains have provided non-denominational ways to help grieving families cope with their sense of loss. Recently, a Buddhist priest on our chaplaincy staff employed guided imagery during our Memorial Service, which helped participants learn how to release the stress and anguish of grief, a skill they may try at home.

Our concluding ritual is “A Time to Share” in which all present are invited to come up to the microphone to express their personal journeys through grief and healing. Participants have told us that this is one of the most poignant and meaningful parts of the Memorial Service because they can speak spontaneously, or read letters or poems to their babies. It is powerful to know that our Memorial Service helps grieving families and staff overcome the deep sense of being alone in sorrow and leads them toward healing and hope.

We also encourage families to bring photos, books, artwork and scrapbooks about their babies to display on our resources table. Refreshments are served following the formal part of the service which gives participants the chance to look at the resources table and meet each other. Each year we receive donated food and flowers from a variety of individuals and companies who appreciate our efforts to bring comfort and validation to grieving families. Everyone leaves the Memorial Service with their votive candles, music CDs, and packets of other helpful materials.

At Beth Israel we strive to give the opportunity for families to find comfort in

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words, to be soothed by music, and to be grounded by what they experience together. Our annual Memorial Service offers strength through the sense of community we achieve, while also providing physical, emotional, and spiritual nourishment. We hope our participants learn new coping skills that will endure long after our direct help ends. Some families come to our Memorial Service once; others participate year after year after year, creating an anniversary experience as a way to mark the progression of their journey through grief. They can remember their babies, but also look forward to the future with hope, knowing that others understand and support them.

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