

Pregnancy and Infant Loss- Bringing Awareness to Australia

By Debbie Justin

In Australia one in four pregnancies ends in a loss. In 2006 alone; there were approximately three thousand perinatal deaths, two thousand one hundred foetal and nine hundred Neonatal deaths in Australia.

Across the world; one in three pregnancies ends in a loss.

In May 2008 it was discovered that October 15 -'International Pregnancy and Infant Loss Remembrance Day', is officially recognised in some countries such as; USA & Canada among a few others; but not in Australia.

This discovery led to a request being made and a petition being raised to make October 15 an Official Remembrance Day for Pregnancy and Infant Loss in Australia; this was done by bereaved parent of four; Nicole Ballinger.

I have written this article in the hope that it will raise awareness to 'Pregnancy and Infant Loss', and to make people aware of the current petition.

As a bereaved parent of two babies to late miscarriage myself; I too know how important this day is and how much it means to bereaved families to have this special Remembrance Day made official in Australia. I felt very alone in my grief as I was the only one that could understand how I felt, nothing or no-one could console me; the pain of it was indescribable. I began to feel disconnected from the world, like a walking corpse, it was like a huge part of me died with my babies.

When it comes to the loss of babies, this is an issue that society continually fails to give recognition to; it seems to be an unspoken issue. In my experience, many people tend to invalidate our feelings following this traumatic experience, which leads bereaved parents to bottle things up; further preventing raising awareness about this issue to society, therefore leading us to suffer in silence. Also known as, "A Silent Grief"; as told to me by; Nicole Ballinger- the lady that got the ball rolling by being the first to approach her local MP's about her wish to see this day declared in Australia. Nicole said; "It took me three and a half years of feeling alone until I learned that pregnancy and infant loss was not a rarity".

Nicole wrote to both of her local MPs, Mrs Shelley Hancock (State of NSW) and Mrs Joanna Gash (Federal) about her wish to see this day declared in Australia, who have both been very supportive about getting this day declared. "My belief is that it should happen and it should not be difficult to achieve something as important." Said; Joanna Gash.

Nicole has also written to the Ministers of Health, the former and current Premiers of NSW, as well as the Federal Cabinet and the former Prime Minister, and is currently finalising a letter to Prime Minister Gillard.

At present there is no formal process for the Government's consideration of proclaiming national days, and without this process in place this day cannot be declared and that is why there has been a delay. However, in Nicole's letter to Prime Minister Gillard, she will be asking her to consider establishing this formal process in order to facilitate the declaration of 15 October.

Nicole manages the petition online which has currently been signed by 2,115 (and counting).

There are many organisations that support this petition; one of them is: 'Bears of Hope'. Bears Of Hope offers support and guidance for parents who experience the loss of their baby during pregnancy, birth or infancy and they also donate exclusive Bears Of Hope and support literature through public and private Hospitals, GP's, Obstetricians and IVF Clinics. "I believe it's important for the thousands of bereaved families within our community to be able to unite on one day in memory of our special babies" Said; Toni Tattis who manages and runs the support organisation for Bears of Hope. Toni herself has experienced the loss of seven babies which includes the losses of her identical twin girls after birth at 24 weeks. "It was debilitating for me. I felt isolated in my grief, disconnected from life."

Another supportive organisation is TLC, AKA: Teddy Love Club.

"The loss of babies is all too often over looked; especially if the babies have not taken a breath." Said; Trudi Penrose-Starr. Trudi is the Co-Founder of TLC, which is an Australia wide support program for the bereaved families of Pregnancy and Infant Loss, and is also the first program to donate Teddy Bears to bereaved parents. They also have an extremely helpful and highly informative 'Resource Pack', which you can purchase from their website at; <http://www.teddyloveclub.org.au/>. Trudi started TLC with Kylie Crawford in October 2002 after the loss of her babies to twin to twin transfusion syndrome. "People dismiss the loss of my girl's precious lives as significant. Having a national remembrance day is taking a stand and telling the whole community (the nation) that yes the loss of babies matters... These precious lives count...One in six babies are stillborn!!"

The grief of Pregnancy and Infant Loss is often invalidated; it is often seen as an insignificant type of loss or grief.

Society often do not realise the fact that the loss of a baby; no matter what kind of loss, early or late miscarriage, stillborn, or death shortly after birth; is just as painful as the loss of a person who has lived for some time.

A baby does not have to have been born or have lived for a certain amount of time to be an important, loved, treasured and real person in someone's life.

For some, the moment the mother and father find out they are going to have a baby the bond between them and their baby begins. This bond grows more and more every day that goes by. They begin to create hopes and dreams, of what their baby will be like, what their lives will be like when their baby arrives, they begin to imagine what or who their baby will look like. The mother shares a deeper more intense bond with her baby as she feels the physical impact of the pregnancy. This bond keeps growing as she feels the baby growing, eventually moving and kicking inside her tummy. The father feels a deeper bond the moment he places his hand on her belly and feels the baby kick for the first time and that bond also keeps growing.

When a person experiences a trauma such as this, all of their hopes, dreams, plans and expectations are crushed. They go into the hospital with a baby and come out with empty arms.

Everywhere they look they see babies and children, with their mothers and fathers. Everywhere a bereaved mother looks she sees a pregnant woman. "I remember wanting to just 'get on with my day' but not wanting to leave my house. You see everywhere I went- pregnant bellies, babies and children seemed to be everywhere". Said Nicole.

There are constant reminders and painful triggers of sadness everywhere, everyday, on TV, in the supermarket, shopping centres, the doctor's surgery, hospitals; the list goes on and this can make them relive that pain over and over again which can lead to PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), Depression, Anxiety or all three combined. "Being repeatedly triggered into one's grief, perhaps 20 or 30 times a day; is PTSD. It's very hard to try to move through the stages of grief when you keep getting thrown back into it". Said; Nicole.

People who have not experienced a loss like this cannot possibly understand what that person is going through and is feeling, even others who have experienced a loss like this cannot know how another is feeling because, every individual is different; every experience is different. Societies often try to put a time on a bereaved families grief; but it does not work like that.

A baby is real, no matter how old, born or unborn, breathing or not breathing; especially to a bereaved family; a baby is a real person, a tiny little human being from the time of conception. "Pregnancy and infant loss has always been a topic too hard to approach by our culture and many parents have grieved in silence because of this". "It's about giving a voice to the silent grieving; that we have lost a BABY; not an IDEA of a baby." Said; Toni Tattis.

Today there are many known official remembrance days for different causes; however for bereaved families of babies; their losses are often just forgotten by others- a distant memory, something that wasn't meant to be. It is unspoken of; even by the bereaved families themselves, as it is not an issue that people know enough about. Therefore; people do not know how to approach this or accept it very well, rather they seem to do the opposite and react in a way that is negative for a bereaved family; without actually intending to do so and also without realising it "Support and acknowledgement of this loss is fundamental to the emotional wellbeing of the grieving community. Hopefully through more education our culture will become more compassionate and supportive towards bereaved parents." Said; Toni Tattis.

There is not enough knowledge and awareness of Pregnancy and Infant Loss out there; this is something that needs to change and needs to be addressed as soon as possible. "We need more people to speak out on this matter and to write letters to the government... and to their local members... if it affects them". Said; Joanna Gash. That is why it is so vital that this day is officially declared in Australia and hopefully worldwide eventually, so that all the bereaved families of babies can come together on this special remembrance day to honour the memory of their beloved babies or as many like to call them; angels. This would be a chance to finally have this pain and grief acknowledged.

Because, just like all living and breathing people that still have the privilege to be walking on earth today, babies are people too; no matter how long they lived or didn't live for.

If you would like to see 15 October officially declared as Pregnancy and Infant Loss Remembrance Day in Australia, you can add your name to the online petition at <http://www.pilari.org/>.

This website is also dedicated to providing information, resources and support to bereaved parents who have lost babies; their friends and families; and the professionals involved