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Renegotiating paternal identity following stillbirth: what and who am I?

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Introduction
This study examines the experiences of men following stillbirth in particular the challenges they face in claiming their identity as a father of an absent child. Fathers felt diminished when concerned about how they were coping were directed only to the women. Contrary to the notion that father’s experience suggests men suffer less distress, this research shows that men also deal with loss at an emotional level.

Methods
This investigation into men’s accounts of loss forms part of a larger study in which twenty-eight men and women participated in interviews and focus groups about their experiences of perinatal death.

Results
By listening to narrative accounts of loss, the passage to parenthood for bereaved men represents a disruption and re-evaluation of who they are, what they knew about the world as they negotiate the incomprehensibility of the death itself.

Discussion
The findings suggest that recognition of the death of baby who is stillborn as well as the impact of the death for father’s is intertwined with personal identity. Men in this study needed to receive recognition as fathers, both at the time of their loss and after.

While his fatherhood is defined as a physical contribution it contributes to an ambivalent sense of identity about being a parent/non-parent/ bereaved parent. Despite attendance at ultrasound scans and opportunities to personify the baby, this sense of ambivalence continued until the birth of a subsequent live child:

Subsequent birth:
“It’s different for the father. They have very little physical relationship to that baby, to that body. I was focused on wow, we’ve got a live baby, you know and being properly feeling like a Dad for the first time. In that sense I didn’t feel like that with Bryn (first child who died) even though in some ways I did. The way I related to Bryn was like he was a man already, it felt like he was holding us at the time and he felt like somebody I knew intimately.”

This account defines the juncture at which Karl felt like a Dad. A different relationship has been formed with his deceased son and continues as though he holds his father in his deepest moments of grief. It also continues on the theme of ambivalence and confusion about when he feels able to claim fatherhood. Other men, attempted to address their ambivalent sense of identity by finding ways in which to memorialise their baby.

Parenting in absence:
“There were things like designing a headstone to go on his grave and things like that. That was hard. That didn’t feel like anything right. It was the best we could have done for Isaac and we always try and make sure Isaac’s grave is kept clean and the flowers look nice. There are no nappies to change. There is nothing we can do for him practically, he is always on our minds and in our hearts, he is with us everywhere we go but there is nothing we can do for him...” [Jamie, father of baby boy Isaac, stillborn at 39 weeks].

Jamie discussed negotiating coming to terms with an ambivalent sense of parenthood while trying to claim the bond with this child. While Jamie is unable to provide the physical aspects of care, his son has been transformed into his inner world, his emotional self and in his daily life.

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