Doulas: Implications for Birth and Bereavement

Kory McGrath
Mother, Funeral Director, Doula & Student Midwife
“Death is the antithesis of life – and at its core, the experience of losing a baby is the opposite outcome of pregnancy that a parent or a caregiver would anticipate.”
What’s in a name?
A note on the language of death in birth and the rebirth of death care:

• Death and ‘loss’
• Miscarriage and stillbirth
• Doula and midwife
• Thanadoula and death midwife
What do doulas do?

• Support informed choice and a woman’s birth plan
• Provide labour support
• Facilitate opportunities for parenting the baby
• Meaning-making
• Provide continuity of care into the post-partum
• Provides respite for family caregivers
• Positively impacts perceptions of the birth experience
The difference between a philosophy and an institution

• Hospice vs. hospital
• Home funeral vs. funeral home
‘First, do nothing.’

-Alexa Hagerty
Doulas may assist in providing agency to the baby, to animate the birth room against the medicalization, the pathology of the outcome of stillbirth.
Key Concepts from Literature Review

The need for culturally sensitive and appropriate care

Silence that surrounds pregnancy loss

Care for caregiver

Emergence of collaborative strategies

Establishment of hospital policies & bereavement protocols/committees
Key Concepts from Experiential Learning

Importance of continuity of care

Encouragement of holding the baby, Disclosure of status of baby, hospital policies on autopsy and disposition

Recognition that support people have special needs

Mentoring among and education for caregivers

Connecting to perinatal bereavement organizations
Analysis and Reflections on Key Issues in Perinatal Death Care

Reclaiming Birth, Reclaiming Death: Perinatal Death as a Woman’s Issue

The Cultural Dichotomy: Finding Symmetry in Sensitive Bereavement Care

Losing Babies, Making Mothers: Validation of Personhood and Parenthood in Perinatal Death
"It is not just the making of babies, but the making of mothers [that is] the miracle of birth"

- Barbara Katz Rothman
What do our own fears, anxieties, cultural beliefs and preconceived ideas about death look like?

How do these ideas impose on how we provide care for bereaved families?

How do we become effective caregivers to bereaved families?
What Not to Say

You can have other children

You have an angel in Heaven

This happened for the best

At least it happened early, before you knew the baby

There was something wrong with the baby anyway

Calling the baby “it” or “fetus”
What to Say

I am so sorry that this has happened.

I just do not know what to say.

Is there anything I can do?

Tell me what happened.

What is your baby’s name?

Will you have a funeral or a naming/blessing ceremony?

How do you want your baby to be remembered?
“The very nature of perinatal grief makes it hard to interview individually, and yet it is the lived experience that opens the window into the veracity of the subject.”
Implications for Birth and Bereavement

Challenges our understanding of ‘normality’

Continuity of care becomes central

‘Upstream thinking’

Supporting and advocating for informed choice
Concluding Thoughts

Theory vs. Experiential Learning

Prepared vs. Reactionary

Be the change that you want to see

“watch what unfolds, rather than directing the grief reaction”
Recommendations

1. Develop strong relationships with L&D
2. Start a bereavement protocol/program
3. Goodwill as opposed to business
4. Informed choice includes funeral options
5. Always be a student
6. Continuity of care
“Know what to do without being asked, listen even when nothing is being said, and ‘be with’ the tangible without neglecting what can not be seen or immediately felt.”

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Virtual/Community Resources

Bereaved Families of Ontario
bereavedfamilies.net

Pregnancy and Infant Loss Network (PAIL)
pailnetwork.ca

StillLife Canada
still-lifecanada.ca
RTS Bereavement Training

Certificate workshop for healthcare professionals involved with perinatal death

Active learning experience

Provided insight, knowledge and hands-on practical experience

Skills necessary to interact with families experiencing perinatal death at all gestations
Canadian-centric publications:


Resources


Perinatal Bereavement Services of Ontario (PBSO), www.pbso.ca


Gunderson Lutheran Resolve Through Sharing (RTS) [Internet] 2011 Available from http://bereavementservices.org/education/resolve_through_sharing_bereavement_training


Resources

Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep [Internet]. Centennial, CO. [Cited Nov 4]. Available from http://www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org/about_us/

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