National Women & Infants Health Programme

Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

BEREAVEMENT SYMBOLS IN PREGNANCY LOSS AND PREGNANCY AFTER LOSS

BACKGROUND

The National Standards for Bereavement Care Following Pregnancy Loss and Perinatal Loss, (Version 2, HSE, 2022) recommend that a Bereavement Symbol that is recognised by hospital staff and the public is used in maternity units/hospitals "to denote anticipatory loss as well as to denote that a bereavement has occurred".

As part of the implementation programme (2017-2021) for the above-mentioned Standards, an audit of Bereavement care was carried out in each of the 19 maternity units in Ireland. In 2017, 18 of the 19 units were using a Bereavement Symbol to indicate pregnancy loss. When the audit was repeated in 2020 all 19 of the units were using a Bereavement Symbol. In 2017, 6 units had developed their own Bereavement Symbol, while the other units were using the Irish Hospice Foundation (IHF) Bereavement Symbol. In 2020, 7 units were using their own Bereavement Symbol.

In HIQA's National Maternity Bereavement Experience Survey, carried out in 2022 only 43 % of people surveyed were offered the opportunity to use a Bereavement Symbol. This varied between different types of pregnancy loss: 33% of those who had a second trimester pregnancy loss and 62% of those who had stillbirths were offered the use of a Bereavement symbol. One person surveyed said that "*I think patients should have a badge or Bereavement Symbol that hospital staff recognise so they don't have to keep explaining their situation*".

The National Women and Infants Programme reviewed the use of Bereavement Symbols in 2023. It was found that 10 maternity units were now using their own Bereavement Symbol, with the remaining units continuing to use the IHF Bereavement Symbol. The 2023 survey showed that the use of a Bereavement Symbol varied greatly between the 19 maternity units. For example, some units used it mostly when the pregnancy loss has been identified, while some also used the symbol in a subsequent pregnancy after, for example, stillbirth. Symbol use also varied between different types of pregnancy loss and at different stages of pregnancy.

When asked about the potential development of a nationally agreed Bereavement Symbol many units wanted to continue to use the Symbol developed in their own unit as a lot of thought, time and education had gone into the development, evaluation, operationalisation and use of the chosen Bereavement Symbol. However, many units requested guidance on the use of Bereavement Symbols, including the type or gestation of pregnancy loss and the timing of its use, as well as around use of Symbols in pregnancy after loss.

National Women & Infants Health Programme

Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

This pathway has been developed to guide staff in the appropriate use of Bereavement Symbol(s) in maternity units/hospitals.

The Bereavement Symbol or Symbols selected for use in each unit/hospital should be agreed locally by staff and management, ideally in collaboration with people with lived experience of pregnancy loss.

The Bereavement Symbol and an explanation of what is it and where it is used should be displayed in a public area in the unit/hospital, to raise awareness of it with all who work in and use the hospital (i.e. staff and patients).

The Bereavement Symbol(s) is intended to be a visual communication tool and is not a substitute for sensitive and compassionate care.

PURPOSE OF PATHWAY

The purpose of this pathway is to guide healthcare professionals in the use of an agreed Bereavement Symbol or Symbols while providing care to people who have experienced Pregnancy Loss.

WHY IS THE BEREAVEMENT SYMBOL USED?

The Bereavement Symbol is used as a communication tool for multidisciplinary healthcare staff to alert colleagues when a pregnancy loss has occurred.

Being aware of this helps all healthcare staff to:

- Ensure women have timely and appropriate access to care when needed, without need for explanation of reproductive or pregnancy loss history at every hospital presentation.
- Have a visible reminder to show respect and dignity in practical way.
- Interact appropriately with those affected by the pregnancy loss.
- Create a quiet and respectful atmosphere in the clinical area
- Prepare staff to meet people who are grieving.
- Acknowledge the pregnancy loss and prevent potentially upsetting questions.
- Facilitate conversations about pregnancy loss.

National Women & Infants Health Programme

Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

RECOMMENDATIONS

- All maternity unit/hospital staff should be educated on the meaning of and the correct use of the Bereavement Symbol(s).
- Information about the use of the Bereavement Symbol(s) and its/their significance should be included in the information given to all women who use the unit/hospital, not just those who experience pregnancy loss.
- The hospital bereavement symbol along with its explanation, should be displayed in a public area to inform staff, parents and visitors to the hospital of its significance.
- Peoples' individual needs and preferences should be respected with regard to use of any bereavement symbol; some people may not want a visual identifier of pregnancy loss.
- The use of the Bereavement Symbol(s) and its/their purpose should be explained to people who experience pregnancy loss, and they should agree to the use of any Symbols.
- If people decline the use of symbols this should be documented in their record, so they are not repeatedly offered the use of symbols.
- The Bereavement Symbol (each hospital uses own chosen Bereavement Symbol) should always be used in second and third trimester pregnancy loss.
- The Bereavement Symbol should be used once pregnancy loss is diagnosed (e.g in second trimester pregnancy loss, stillbirth, neonatal death, and including following a Termination of Pregnancy for Fetal Anomaly).
- Consideration should be given to using a dedicated/different Bereavement Symbol in cases of first trimester pregnancy loss, for example in recurrent miscarriage.
- The Irish Neonatal Health Alliance Butterfly Bereavement Symbol should be used in a multiple pregnancy where there are one or more surviving infants. This symbol is available from www.inha.ie along with a poster explaining its purpose.
- A different, identifiable Symbol should be used in Pregnancy After Loss (i.e. for pregnancy loss after 13 weeks and when people are attending for care in in a new pregnancy in the same hospital/unit).

National Women & Infants Health Programme

Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

WHERE THE BEREAVEMENT SYMBOL SHOULD BE USED
(with the woman's agreement)

- On the woman's healthcare record - paper or electronic healthcare record.
- On the electronic whiteboard in MN-CMS hospitals.
- On physical whiteboard in all other hospitals.
- On a direct admission card for the woman.
- On the woman's room door (delivery suite/theatre).
- At the midwives/nurses' station on the ward or unit.
- On the door of the woman's room on the ward.
- On resources associated with pregnancy loss and bereavement care.
- In the Pregnancy Loss Clinic/OPD for follow up appointments.
- In the case of a pregnancy loss in a multiple pregnancy with a surviving infant or infants on the cot or incubator of the surviving infant or infants.
- On a woman's healthcare record in a pregnancy after loss.
- In the specialised antenatal clinic for pregnancy after loss.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bereavement Checklist. What to do when your baby has died or is going to die. Irish Neonatal Health Alliance. 2021.

National Bereavement Standards Oversight Group, HSE. On The Implementation of the National Standards for Bereavement Care following Pregnancy Loss and Perinatal Death. 2021.

National Bereavement Standards Oversight Group, HSE. National Standards for Bereavement Care Following Pregnancy Loss and Perinatal Death, Version 2. 2022.

Health Information and Quality Authority. Findings of the National Maternity Bereavement Experience Survey. 2022.

The HSE response to the findings of the National Maternity Bereavement Experience Survey. Health Service Executive. 2022.