

Infant Cremation and Ashes

History

In late 2012, a group of parents in Scotland discovered that Mortonhall Crematorium in Edinburgh was burying ashes from the cremation of stillborn and very young babies, without the knowledge or consent of the parents. The parents had been told that there would be no ashes. This practice had been going on for over 30 years.

There has been widespread publicity about this in Scotland which has caused a great deal of uncertainty, pain and distress for parents who had accepted in good faith that there would be no ashes. In response, the Scottish Government set up the Scottish Commission on Infant Cremation, chaired by Lord Bonhomy, to make recommendations on infant cremation in Scotland. At the same time, Edinburgh Council, which runs Mortonhall Crematorium, set up the Mortonhall Investigation Team chaired by Dame Elish Angiolini. Sands sent a submission to the Commission and met with the Investigation Team in summer 2013. These reports have now been published (Angiolini 2014; Bonomy 2014).

Implications for the whole of the UK

Sands is aware that, although some UK crematoria always try to produce ashes from infant cremations, others do not. Some cremation authorities have maintained that there is no human tissue left after a baby is cremated, therefore there are no ashes. (There is no legal definition of ashes.)

Sands welcomes the recommendations of both the Mortonhall Investigation team Report and the Scottish Commission. Both reject any distinction between ashes and human remains. The Scottish Commission states that:

'Cremation authorities should review their practices immediately to ensure that, in dealing with the "ashes" following cremation, they proceed on the basis that the "ashes" are "all that is left at the end of the cremation process".' Bonomy 2014.

It is now clear that, when the cremation process is adapted, remains are visible from babies of 17 weeks gestation or more (Angiolini 2014). Any ashes, however few, that are associated with their baby, may be important to bereaved parents and should be offered to them. Parents can then choose to keep, bury or scatter them in a place that can become a focal point for their family in the years to come.

Sands' campaign

We now know that this issue is not confined to Scotland and that there are crematoria in the rest of the UK that routinely state that there will be no ashes. So Sands has sent letters to all Heads of Midwifery and the Chief Executives of all NHS Trust and Health Boards in England and Wales, asking them to review their contracts with crematoria and funeral directors, and to check that ashes are routinely offered to parents after a single baby is cremated, and that trays are used whenever possible during a shared cremation. If they find that ashes are not routinely offered, Sands urges Trusts and Health Boards to ask the crematorium they use to change its practice. If necessary, Sands is urging Trusts and Health Boards to find an alternative crematorium that will offer ashes. This should be possible in most areas of the UK. A copy of this letter can be found on the Sands website.

Sands is also writing to all the authorities responsible for crematoria, and to the relevant professional organisations, including the Federation of Burial and Cremation Authorities and the National Association of Funeral Directors, to stress the importance to parents of having ashes wherever possible and to urge those crematoria that currently do not provide ashes to change their practice. Some crematoria may need to modify their cremation process in order to produce ashes. The Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management offers guidance on how this can be done.

Implications for midwifery practice

Parents who have had a late miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal death must be able to make a fully informed choice about their baby's funeral. So staff who discuss a hospital cremation with parents need to know if the crematorium always tries to ensure that, when a single baby is cremated, there are ashes that can be offered to parents.

If the crematorium does not offer ashes, or if the cremation will be shared with other babies and separate trays are not used, parents must be told this before they make their decision. Some parents may prefer to choose another crematorium, or may opt for burial instead, even if this means arranging and paying for the funeral themselves.

Staff who organise cremations on behalf of the hospital also need a clear procedure to ensure that parents are informed when ashes are ready for collection. Funeral directors and crematoria that organise funerals for hospitals do not usually have the parents' names or contact details and so cannot contact the parents themselves. There must be a system in place to ensure that a designated member of the hospital staff is informed when ashes are ready. He or she is then responsible for contacting the parents to let them know when and where from their baby's ashes can be collected.

Improving Bereavement Care Team
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References

Angiolini A (2014) *Mortonhall Investigation Report*

http://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/info/20004/council_and_democracy/957/mortonhall_investigation_report/2

Bonomy I. (2014) *Infant Cremation Commission Report* www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0045/00453055.pdf

Please note: Guidance on the production of ashes can be sought from crematoria that currently offer ashes to parents, or from the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management (ICCM): National Office, City of London Cemetery, Aldersbrook Road, Manor Park, London E12 5DG. Tel. 020 8989 4661.