

Sands Position Statement

Taking the Baby Home

All bereaved parents should be offered the opportunity to take their baby's body home if they want to.

The only circumstance in which this is not possible is when a Medical Certificate of Cause of Death (MCCD) cannot be issued and the death is being referred to the coroner or procurator fiscal. There are no other legal reasons to prevent parents from taking their baby home.

If there are good clinical reasons for discouraging parents from taking their baby home, or if the parents do not feel comfortable or able to do so, they should be offered the option of a longer stay in hospital, especially if they do not live nearby.

Potential benefits for parents who want to take their baby home include:

- more time with their baby away from a clinical setting and an opportunity to say goodbye in the privacy of their own home
- being offered a choice and a decision that they can make when so much has spun out of their control
- time to introduce the baby to siblings, extended family and friends and to recognise and validate the baby's place within the family
- more opportunities to create memories which will need to last a lifetime
- an opportunity to take responsibility for their baby and to feel trusted by those "in authority" at a time when their confidence as parents has been shattered.

Information for staff

Responsibility for the baby's body

When a baby dies, the parents are legally responsible for ensuring that the body is buried or cremated according to the law. (The legal requirement for burial or cremation does not apply to babies who are miscarried before 24 weeks. However it is customary to arrange burial or cremation for these babies.) The baby's parents may choose to delegate responsibility for the burial or cremation to the hospital, if this option is offered.

Paperwork from the hospital

Although there is no legal requirement for this, Sands recommends that parents who want to take their baby out of the hospital should be given a document confirming their right to do so. This should include a declaration, signed by the parents, confirming that they are taking responsibility for their baby's body and that they will either bring the baby back to the hospital for the funeral or arrange the funeral themselves. A sample form is attached and is also available to download from the Sands website. <https://www.uk-sands.org/professionals/resources-for-health-professionals/forms-and-certificates>

To protect the parents, for example, in the unlikely event of a traffic accident, the sample form includes the contact details of someone at the hospital who can, if necessary, confirm the parents' right to take their baby home.

If the mother has psychological issues and/or a mental health history, additional support and advice should be sought from a mental health professional if appropriate. Arrangements should then be made for additional support and supervision from professionals in the community.

Transport

Parents can take their baby home by car. Some authorities advise that safety seats and belts are used to ensure that the baby is secure during the journey. Alternatively the baby could be placed in a moses basket which is secured with a seat belt. Parents or other people who accompany them may need to hold the moses basket to keep it steady during the journey.

If the parents want to take their baby home by taxi or minicab, they should check first that the driver is willing to transport the body. Public transport is not advisable.

Who should be informed?

The hospital mortuary should be informed and should receive a copy of the signed form for the mortuary register.

The mother's GP, community midwife and health visitor should be told that the parents are taking their baby home in case the parents need support.

There is no need to inform the police or any other authorities.

How long should the baby be at home?

This depends on the baby's condition and on the temperature of the room in which he or she will be kept. Although there is no specific time limit, a maximum of three days is advisable (unless there is to be a post mortem examination, see below). Hospitals may want to consider buying a cold cot to lend to parents in this situation.

Parents should be advised how to keep their baby cool and told about changes that may occur in the baby's appearance, for example, darkening of the lips. Parents may want to consider these changes when deciding how long to have their baby at home. They should also be warned that the baby's skin may be fragile. In this case, when holding the baby, it may be best, to place him or her on a pillow and to hold the pillow.

Post mortems

If the parents have agreed to a post mortem, they should be asked to bring their baby back to the hospital after about 24 hours. This is because the sooner a post mortem is done the more chance there is of finding out why the baby died.

A baby can also be taken home *after* a post mortem examination. The sites of suture lines should be explained to the parents.

Support at home

Sands recommends that:

- parents are given a 24-hour contact number at the hospital so that they can call for help and support if they need it.
- a GP, community midwife or health visitor or a member of the hospital bereavement team visits them at home, daily if the parents would like this, to ensure that they are coping.

What happens next?

- **If the baby was registered as a stillbirth or neonatal death**, there is a legal requirement to bury or cremate. The form that permits cremation or burial – issued by the registrar when the parents register the stillbirth or the death – includes a tear-off slip that will be returned to the registrar once the burial or cremation has taken place. This enables the registrar to check that the law has been followed.
- **If the baby was born dead before 24 completed weeks of pregnancy**, the death cannot be registered. There is no legal requirement to bury or cremate the baby but it is customary to do so.

If the hospital is arranging the funeral, the parents should be told when they should bring the baby back and where they should take him or her.

If the parents are arranging the funeral themselves, they can take the baby to the funeral director if they are using one. It may sometimes be possible for the parents to take the baby to the cemetery or crematorium themselves but this should be checked with the cemetery or crematorium management.

A baby's body cannot be taken out of the country without professional advice from a funeral director.

Conclusion

Having the body of a loved one at home before the funeral is common practice in many countries and cultures. Parents who have a live baby are entrusted with the care of that baby. There is no reason not to entrust to bereaved parents the care of a baby who has died.

Name of hospital/ trust/ health board

Form for parents who take their baby's body home

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This is to confirm that (name(s) of parent(s))

of (address) _____

Who had a late miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal death on (date) _____

have taken their baby from (name and address of hospital) _____

_____ Date _____

I / We, the parent(s), hereby take full responsibility for our baby whilst he /she is in our care. We will (tick as appropriate):

☐

return our baby to the hospital on (date) _____

☐

make our own funeral arrangements.

Parent(s) Name(s) (please print):

Signature _____ Signature _____

Name of staff member (please print) _____

Position (please print) _____

In case of need or concern please contact:

Staff member's name _____ Job Title _____

Department direct line _____ Signature _____

24-hour phone contact for support _____

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Improving Bereavement Care Team