

# Dear Parents

*A stillbirth causes overwhelming grief. You and your partner are sharing the loss of a precious part of yourselves as well as the loss of future dreams and plans. You will be given the option to see and spend time with your baby. You may talk or sing to your baby. You may hold your baby. You may take pictures of your baby. This is your time to say both hello and goodbye to your baby. This time can be very important to you and to all the members of your family. The hospital staff will support you and do their best to accommodate your wishes.*

## WHY? WHAT HAPPENED?

In the minutes and first hours after learning of your baby's death, you, your partner and your family will be overwhelmed with feelings and questions. Your doctor/midwife may not have immediate answers to your questions, but these questions will be on your mind as you grieve your loss and think about your future.

Understanding why your baby died may help you deal with some of your questions, as well as with your grief, because the actual cause of death may be quite different than what you might be imagining on your own. Knowing the cause of death may also help you and your doctor/midwife prevent problems from occurring in a future pregnancy. Also, finding out what did not cause the death (negative tests) can be very valuable information for you and your doctor/midwife.

## WHAT KINDS OF TESTS CAN BE DONE?

Your doctor/midwife may test the mother's blood. The placenta will also be examined. Your doctor/midwife may ask your permission to have your baby evaluated by X-rays, photographs, and/or special blood tests. Your doctor/midwife may request an examination of your baby by a pathologist or a geneticist. Findings from all these tests may help determine the actual cause of your baby's death.

This information can be helpful to you emotionally as you mourn and grieve as well as helping you to have a successful pregnancy in the future.

These are some tests that may be helpful:

### **Chromosome Analysis**

- Determines the genetic makeup of your baby. Sometimes a problem with the genes can result in an obvious or invisible cause of death for your baby.
- This test can be done by collecting amniotic fluid (amniocentesis) before you deliver your baby or from the placenta or baby after you deliver.

### **X-rays**

- Sometimes a baby's appearance suggests there may be a problem that can be detected by X-ray. X-rays are done after your baby is born.
- A blood sample from the mother can be studied to determine if a virus, bacteria, a type of abnormal blood cells, or an unknown illness was present in mother or baby at the time of your baby's death.

## Placenta Examination

- The placenta will be visually examined at the time of delivery by your doctor/midwife. Cultures and samples for genetic testing can also be obtained at this time. A detailed examination of the placenta in the laboratory by a pathologist can provide additional valuable information.
- Your doctor/midwife will receive a preliminary report usually within days after the examination of the placenta.

## WHAT ABOUT AN AUTOPSY?

An autopsy is a surgical procedure performed to examine your baby's appearance, internal organs and to examine small amounts of the baby's tissue under a microscope. Autopsies can sometimes provide information about the cause of death. Autopsies may also find information that can help you with future pregnancy planning. This procedure is done by a physician, maintaining the dignity of your baby at all times. [If a viewing of your baby in a funeral home is desired, the funeral director will prepare and dress your baby for viewing after the autopsy has been completed. Having an autopsy may not determine why your baby died; but if this happens, the autopsy may tell you what did *not* cause the death. Many parents find agreeing to an autopsy a difficult decision to make because they feel they do not want to disturb their baby. You can decide to limit the autopsy to only external examination, no examination of the brain, or to only certain areas of the body that have been identified as a concern. The importance and value of an autopsy of your baby will be discussed with you by your doctor/midwife

### **Things to Remember about Autopsy:**

- An autopsy will only be done with your written consent.
- Take the time you need to make the decision that is right for you and your family.
- You may limit the type of examination done.
- Getting results can take from six weeks to a couple of months.
- Your doctor/midwife will typically receive the report, so ask before your postpartum visit at about six weeks if the doctor/midwife has the preliminary report.
- Request a copy of the report be sent to any medical professional with whom you are discussing future pregnancy planning.

If your provider does not receive the written report, contact your hospital's medical records or pathology department to follow up. Finding out your baby has died is an emotionally difficult and confusing time with many decisions for you to make. Your providers will do their best to answer your questions and guide you in your future family planning.

## What to do first if you are not in labor or having a health issue

Most parents' initial reaction to the loss of a baby is to want to be in the hospital and start the labor/delivery of their baby. If your provider has no concerns about your health and you are not in labor, you can ask if you can go home, even if it's just for a couple of hours. This will give you time to be in the comfort of your home, and allow you to express your feelings in a private setting. Having some time before starting labor allows you and your partner/support person to contact any family/friends/religious leaders that will be supportive; find out about resources available; consider the options discussed in this plan; plan for your absence from home; and gather items for you and your baby.

We encourage you to look at the options on the following pages. You can also ask your provider if there is someone at the hospital to discuss this plan with you prior to admission.

*We hope this information helps guide you  
through this difficult time.*