



Exploring perinatal death with midwifery students' using a collaborative art project



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ABSTRACT

Objective: To explore the influence of the Amulet artwork and exhibition on midwifery students' perceptions of caring for parents experiencing perinatal death.

Design: A descriptive qualitative design involving face-to-face semi-structured interviews following institutional ethical approval.

Setting: A regional Maternity Hospital in Ireland which hosted the National Artwork and Exhibition exploring the hidden world of infant death.

Participants: A purposive sample of six consenting post registration midwifery students who had attended the Amulet artwork and exhibition.

Findings: Four core themes emerged and these were i) entering the mother's world and hearing her pain; ii) the journey of grief and connecting with the bereaved parent's unique experience; iii) facing the challenge of providing effective perinatal bereavement care; and iv) maintaining a journey of compassionate practice.

Conclusion and implications for practice: Exposure to, and reflection on the Amulet artwork and exhibition increased students' awareness and insight into the non-linear nature of the grieving process, and to the importance of maintaining a journey of compassionate care for parents experiencing perinatal death. The findings suggest that the use of creative women-centered strategies promote affective learning in relation to perinatal death and so may be of use to educators and maternity care providers.

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1. Introduction

Bereavement is part of life, and bereavement and death associated with stillbirth is recognised as a time when there may be only one chance to get it right (Downe et al., 2013). As Schott et al. (2007) emphasise, memories may be the only things that parents have to take home, and most of those memories will involve the care they receive. In the Amulet artwork and exhibition, the amulets are special object

signifiers, particular to infant loss; protecting the bereaved parent's memory of their deceased infant (Brett, 2014, www.amulets.ie). Caring for bereaved parents has been influenced through the years by women, their stories, voluntary organisations and pioneers in the professional field, so that care can be based on a firm knowledge base, standards of care, education and training and a partnership approach. In 1981, Myles highlighted the importance of kindness and compassionate care for bereaved parents, acknowledging how the midwife facilitates this through her words and actions. These factors continue to be recognised as fundamental to contemporary midwifery care.

Individualised care and the manner in which staff behaved was of key importance in a UK national survey of parents after stillbirth or the death of their baby (Redshaw et al., 2014). Downe et al. (2013) in their study on bereaved parents' experience of stillbirth suggest that an ethos of care at all levels of the organisation is central to positive staff caring behaviours. Hospital policy and meeting training needs of

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staff has a positive effect on attitudes towards bereavement care, demonstrated by Chan et al. (2004). Caring for bereaved parents has been described as stressful for health care professionals, and there is a growing awareness of the importance of the emotional needs of health care professionals as well as parents (Kenworthy and Kirkham, 2011). Midwifery students may well find themselves supporting bereaved couples experiencing perinatal death, and they will certainly be faced with the situation as newly qualified midwives.

There is a lack of discussion and debate in the literature on how midwifery students are prepared to care for bereaved parents (Mitchell, 2005). Begley (2003) and McKenna and Rolls (2011) refer to the importance of developing strategies to support students as they acquire the skills necessary to deal with bereaved parents. Facilitation of affective teaching and learning strategies in the context of bereavement is challenging within the university setting, where the emphasis can tend towards didactic teaching (Laporte Matzo et al., 2003). An evaluation of perinatal bereavement education found that midwifery students' most positive comments related to hearing the women's stories and the involvement of user groups, with limited value attributed to the theoretical input (Mitchell, 2005). Hollins Martin et al. (2014) found the use of a work book to be an effective method of teaching bereavement care to midwifery students. In their account of using a creative approach to the teaching of spirituality to students, Mitchell and Hall (2007) conclude that educationalists need to further investigate how students can be facilitated to learn the art and science of midwifery, within the constraints of a formal curriculum.

The Amulet: Anamnesis is a collaborative artwork and exhibition which was initiated and produced by artist Marie Brett, who worked with women exploring the hidden world of infant loss. 'Anamnesis' is a Greek word meaning to recall to memory, referring to a patient's account of their medical history and amulets are small objects, often worn, thought to give protection or to bring good fortune. Photographs of family amulets together with bereaved parent's stories describe their amulet's meaning (Brett, 2014, www.amulets.ie). The Amulet exhibition tour, funded through The Arts Council Touring and Dissemination of Work Award 2014, was brought on site to the University Maternity Hospital, Limerick in September 2014. This qualitative descriptive study explored the influence of the Amulet artwork and exhibition on midwifery students' perceptions of caring for bereaved parents.

2. Methods

2.1. Study Design and Sample

A qualitative descriptive approach was used, facilitating the opportunity to gain in-depth knowledge of participants' perceptions of the Amulet artwork and exhibition. This approach enabled the researchers to stay close to the data, as it aimed to describe participants' experiences rather than explain them (Sandelowski, 2010) and was identified as appropriate to meet the needs of the study (Sandelowski, 2000).

The study population comprised of post registration students on the eighteen month midwifery programme ($n = 9$). As part of the students' theoretical module prior to final practice placement, students were facilitated to attend the Amulet artwork and exhibition in Sept. 2014. Purposeful sampling was used and six student midwives participated in the study.

Ethical approval to conduct the study was granted by the Educational and Health Science Education Committee at the University of Limerick. The following steps were taken to address ethical concerns of involving students in faculty research (Ferguson et al., 2006). Participation in the study was completely voluntary and took place after all theoretical assignments had been completed. Students were invited to participate in the study three months after attending the Amulet artwork and exhibition. Information on the study was provided to the students via e-mail by a member of faculty not teaching on the programme and the students were asked to reply only if they were interested in

participating in the study. The information sheet for potential participants set out the details of the study and that a copy of the transcript would be made available to participants if requested, the student's right to withdraw from the study at any time, the benefits of the study, and the next step to take if the student chose to participate. Written consent was obtained before the commencement of the interview.

2.2. Data Collection

Data were collected between January and March 2015 via semi-structured interviews, as the questions can be open ended enough to allow interviewees to express their perspectives on the topic but also facilitate comparison across the participants (Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013). The interviews were facilitated by lecturers of midwifery. The interview guide was informed by Gibbs (1988) framework of reflection focusing on description, thoughts and feelings, evaluation, conclusion and action plan. All participants were asked to discuss their perceptions of the Amulet artwork and exhibition and to reflect on what it meant to them, and how it might affect their practice in the future (see Box 1). Paraphrasing and cues such as 'can you tell me a little more about that' were used. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by two members of the research team.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data from the interview recordings were analysed using Burnard's (2006) content analysis framework. Three members of the team identified codes and early themes. Further review of themes was conducted with the lead researcher and an expert in the area of bereavement and loss, where themes were defined and named. All members of the team including the artist Marie Brett reviewed the final themes and report. A clear audit trail was maintained of how data were managed and how findings were derived.

2.4. Findings

Four core themes emerged: i) entering the mother's world and hearing her pain; ii) the journey of grief and connecting with the bereaved parent's unique experience; iii) facing the challenge of providing effective perinatal bereavement care and iv) maintaining a journey of compassionate practice.

2.4.1. Entering the Mother's World and Hearing her Pain

The students described their preconceived ideas prior to entering the exhibition space, and then their thoughts and feelings as they became engrossed in the Amulet artwork and exhibition. The women's voices and their amulets created a special place where students and other health care professionals could reflect on their role, and the impact they have on bereaved parents' journey.

Box 1 Interview schedule

Can you tell me what your experience of the Amulet artwork and project has been?
What thoughts and feelings did the experience raise for you as a student midwife?
What sense do you make of perinatal bereavement and death having viewed the Amulet Artwork and project?
What effect has the Amulet Artwork and project had on your practice as a student midwife?
How might the Amulet Artwork and project influence your practice in the future?

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