

Feature

Support group in call for volunteers as it begins awareness campaign

Losing a baby: help is here

For many years stillbirth and neonatal death were subjects that were avoided, **Kate Chambré** reports on the experiences of two couples and highlights the help and support out there today

ATTENDING the funeral of my nephew Fred was one of the most emotional experiences of my life to date.

Watching my distraught sister and her husband bid their son farewell at the graveside was harrowing not just for me but the whole family.

It felt as though there was nothing anyone could say or do to help ease their suffering. As Sophia's sister I felt totally helpless.

My sister was eight months' pregnant when her son died in her womb. He was her third child.

I cannot possibly describe the roller coaster of emotions she must have gone through during that period of her life but what I can say is that she was overcome with unimaginable grief.

It still brings tears to my eyes thinking back to that time.

Sophia, 35, and her husband Stephen Cross, 38, from Crossgar, now have four children - Harry, Alice, Beatrice and Isabella. But not a day goes by when Fred is out of their thoughts.

Tragically there are approximately 200 stillbirth and neonatal deaths in Northern Ireland each year - this averages out at around four a week.

For many years the subject of stillbirth and neonatal death was taboo. It was simply never discussed and brushed under the carpet, which meant that hundreds of mothers and fathers never properly mourned the loss of the babies.

Some mothers weren't even allowed to see or hold their child, and to this day still do not know where they were buried. Or if they have graves.

Thankfully things have changed since then and in recent years far more support has been made available for parents. However, not everyone knows how to access this support.

Sands (Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society) is one such organisation that has helped mothers and fathers, including my sister and brother-in-law, come to terms with their loss.

Colin, 32, and Cathy Pidgeon, 35, from Dundonald in east Belfast, are another couple who drew strength from the charity when their daughter Daisy died on February 12, last year. They are expecting their fourth child in October.

Colin and Cathy help run the Belfast group of Sands volunteers, like my sister, as "befrienders" offering support and advice to parents who have lost a child through stillbirth or neonatal death.

Colin described the experience of losing his daughter Daisy as one of the most desolate periods of his life.

"Cathy was about 29-weeks' pregnant and all seemed to be going reasonably well. She had a bit of bleeding and mucus so we went to the hospital for a check-up," he said.

"She was expecting them to send her away but she was told instead: 'Look there's no easy way to say this but I'm afraid your baby's sick.'"

The couple were later told that their daughter had Down's syndrome, and that her heart was failing. Their baby was going to die in a matter of days.

"It got to the point where the doctors said that they couldn't do anything more for the baby

and it was a question of letting nature take its course. We knew she was going to die," said Colin.

On a Friday, four days later, Daisy's heart stopped beating and their lives changed forever.

"It was an extremely unpleasant and desolate experience. But we had to try and carry on as normal for the sake of our two young children Rosie and Matthew," he said.

"We had our daughter Rosie's first birthday on the Sunday which was a bit difficult for us."

Colin said that the charity Sands helped them come to terms with their loss, and realise that there are many other people out there who have been through the same experience and survived it.

"After Daisy died I felt completely stunned and numb. It was a completely detached feeling like it was happening to someone else," he said.

"Your life is continuing but I felt my life had stopped. Her death was a defining point in both of our lives."

Colin and Cathy's youngest child was too young to understand what had happened to Daisy but Matthew, aged three-and-a-half at the time, was much more aware of what was going on.

To help with his grieving process the parents asked Matthew if he wanted to see Daisy's body, but he chose not to.

"It really needs to be the children who decide whether or not they want to see their brother or sister's body. If the parent says 'no you can't' it could create feelings of anger and resentment later on in their life," said Colin.

At the moment it is Sands awareness month in Northern Ireland.

This week and next a number of volunteers for the charity will be travelling around a variety of maternity units to talk to staff about their experiences of stillbirth and neonatal death.

"Cathy and I were very well looked after after Daisy died but not everyone has a good experience. Some parents are treated without kindness which must be brutal for them," said Colin.

At present Sands Northern Ireland are appealing for as much support as possible to raise awareness about the charity.

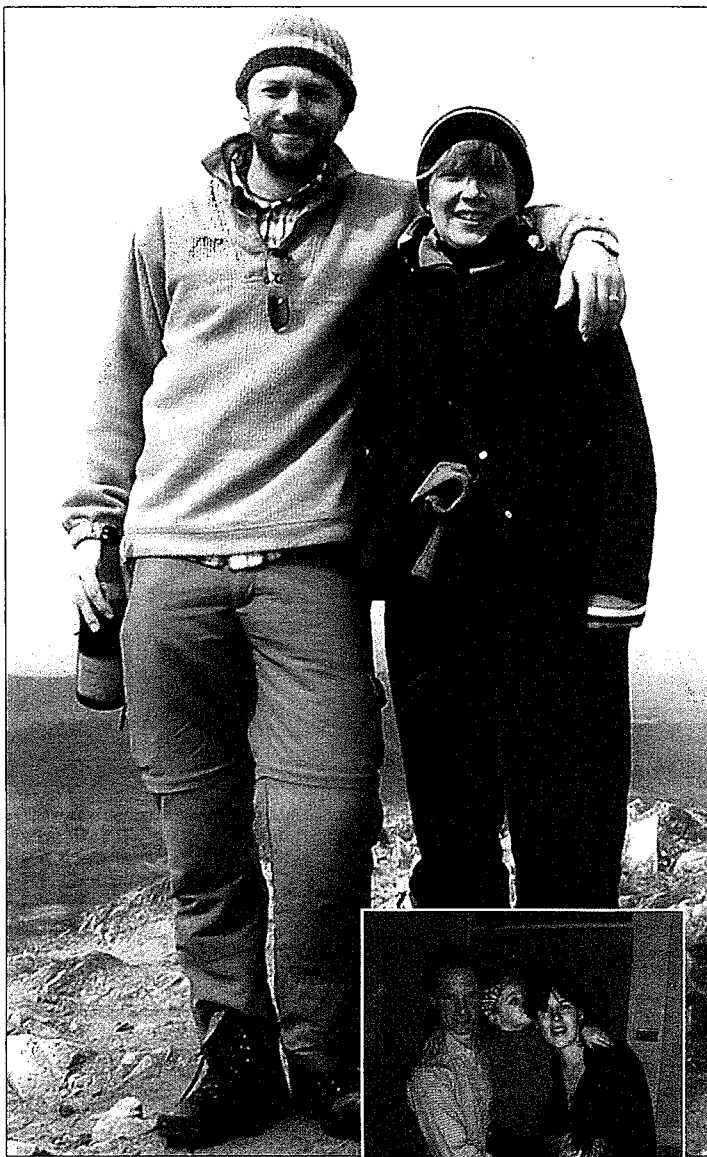
If you have lost a baby recently or many years ago and would like to talk to someone who has been through the same experience, call 077 40 99 34 50.

Alternatively, phone the same number if you are one year past your bereavement and feel you could help other bereaved parents through befriending.

The charity needs people who are interested in attending Sands befriender training and have the time and energy to give support locally.

There are about a dozen befrienders across Northern Ireland and the charity has support groups in Belfast, Portadown and Enniskillen. Another support group is also to be set up soon in Londonderry.

Later this month the website for Sands Northern Ireland (www.sandsni.org) will be up and running but in the meantime for further information you can visit the UK website www.uk-sands.org



Above, Colin and Cathy Pidgeon at the top of Mount Errigal in Co Donegal on the due date of their daughter Daisy. Daisy died in her mother's womb at nearly 30 weeks



Right, Stephen and Sophia Cross in hospital with their children Alice, Harry and their fifth child Isabella after her birth