

## Supporting Families After the Loss of a Child Brief

Natalie Martin

On July 29, 2015, I went into labour at 26 weeks, 5 days. We drove to Lion's Gate Hospital, in North Vancouver, as quickly as possible. After a number of scans, observations, and interventions (trying to slow labour so I could be transferred to a hospital with a NICU), it was decided that an emergency c-section had to be done. A team from Royal Columbian Hospital's NICU were there to receive our son, Wesley, who was born weighing 2lbs, 1oz., and relatively healthy, given the circumstances.

We got to meet Wesley very briefly before he was whisked away by ambulance. I was told that my ambulance would arrive shortly after so that I could follow him, but it never came. 18 hours went by with very little information on Wesley's condition, and no plans to get me over to his hospital. We had had enough, and less than 24 hours after major surgery, I discharged myself and we drove over to Royal Columbian on our own.

Upon arrival at RH, we were informed that they had no room for us. There would be no where for me to stay, let alone even lay down. After visiting Wesley, we were then escorted into a private room with a whole team of social workers and doctors. They told us that Wesley's condition became very serious over the night, but that he had stabilized since, and was doing alright.

By that afternoon, my body was heading toward shock. I'd been standing by his bed for hours, and had no where to rest. I began shaking and feeling faint, so they brought me a wheelchair. Finally, we were told they had found an unused room that could work for us for a couple of nights. It was a room they no longer used as a delivery room because it was too small to house the team. We were happy to have any space at all, however cramped it was. We were staying in the delivery ward though, so it was emotionally excruciating to hear the cries of other babies.

Over the next two days, Wesley's condition worsened. He developed a brain haemorrhage that wouldn't clot, and by day 3 was having regular seizures and was on a steady dose of morphine. We decided to end his suffering, and we held him while life support was pulled. His strong heart beat for a full hour on its own, as he clung to life, and we clung to him. After he had passed, we chose to participate in bathing him and dressing him in a little knitted outfit for cremation. It was an incredibly beautiful and fulfilling process.

During our stay at Royal Columbian, we experienced some incredibly good, and incredibly bad team members. We met a number of doctors as their shifts changed over; some of them were incredibly blunt and inconsiderate to our mental state. Some were elusive and evasive. We had trouble finding them, and had trouble getting any information out of them once we did. After a particularly earth-

shattering experience of walking in on Wesley with a collapsed lung and a whole team of people hustling around him, I collapsed in the NICU. Someone sent down the kindest, calmest, empathetic doctor from peds to talk to us. He was the first doctor to even acknowledge my husband and his feelings, and not just talk directly to me. He touched briefly on Wesley's state, but he spent more time talking about what this experience means for us as a couple, and what it could do to our marriage, depending on how we handle our grief. I got the sense that this specific doctor was sent to us because our mental states were breaking, and we're grateful to whoever made that call. Maybe it's because he's used to talking to children, but he seemed to have a much bigger heart than all of the NICU doctors we had encountered.

The one consistently incredible team was the nurses. Every single one of them was so supportive. They were the ones who encouraged us to stay with Wesley during the bathing, and we're so, so glad we listened.

We had social workers follow up with us after our discharge, but I didn't find them particularly helpful. We also tried a grief counsellor, but again, I didn't find it helpful. I ended up with a trauma counsellor who specializes in PTSD, and they were exactly what I needed. I didn't need someone to tell me my thoughts and feelings were all 'normal'. I knew they were. I needed help in managing my triggers, help in encouraging the protective walls that Shock had erected in my brain to come down, so I could process what was behind them. My trauma counsellor was able to do this. We could only afford a handful of sessions though, so most of the mental work was done on our own.

In summary, our main issues with the service we received through this experience were:

- being separated from my child after delivery
- not being provided any transport to get to my child after said separation
- no bed to receive me at the hospital in which my child was staying
- insensitive doctors working in the NICU
- connected to grief instead of trauma counsellors, and having to pay for the counselling ourselves

I'd be happy to speak more about our experience if need be, so feel free to contact me.

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