

The Voice of the Unborn Baby

By Sonja Smith



Sonja Smith from the Sonja Smith Funeral Group says "We have to help families to create memories, because there are none..."

"Sometimes love is for a moment. Sometimes love is for a lifetime. Sometimes a moment is a lifetime." - Author unknown

October is *International Pregnancy Loss and Infant Death Awareness month*. All over the world, bereaved parents light a candle on the 15th of October every year, creating a *Wave of Light* on this day of remembrance. This is just one of the many commemoration ideas which can be found on October 15th's website.

As a funeral director, I am confronted with death on a daily basis. But it is the little ones, the tiny feet that tiptoe through my heart...

I can still remember, when I first joined the funeral industry 17 years ago, my heart wept every single time a little baby was admitted to the facilities. I used to tell my colleagues: "Please bring the little ones to me, I will wash and dress them." I was fascinated by their perfectly formed bodies – these beautiful babies, born asleep. Why were they created, nurtured for nine months in their mother's womb, only to never see the light? They call it the Birth of Death...

The bond between a mother and her child starts with a thought: "I want to have a baby." Then comes the pregnancy test: Positive! The sonars nowadays are 3D and 4D, you can actually see what your unborn baby is going to look like! The stork tea follows where gifts and good wishes are showered on the new mother-to-be. A baby room is assembled, perhaps by the proud father-to-be. And then, those dreaded words: "We cannot find a heartbeat... We've tried our best, but..."

In South Africa, a miscarriage is the spontaneous end of a pregnancy at a stage where the embryo or foetus is incapable of surviving up to the 26th week of gestation. Stillborn, in relation to a child, means that it had at least 26 weeks of existence in the uterus, but showed no sign of life after complete birth. In real life however, a mother does not refer to her unborn baby as a foetus up to six months, and then calls it a baby from 26 weeks onwards!

Why then is a stillborn baby born after 26 weeks of gestation afforded a dignified funeral, where parents and grandparents can say goodbye, but the one born at 25 weeks and six days is thrown away in a red anatomical bin as medical waste?

I made this horrific discovery when I was called to a private hospital in Pretoria to fetch a pair of triplets, born at 20 weeks. The medical practitioner agreed to sign the notification of death, but the babies were missing. "How is this possible?" I asked. They then informed me that the medical waste truck had already collected the babies. Needless to say, the unit manager at the time had to get into her car and drive to the medical waste plant to search for the babies.

She found them between amputated limbs, organs, blood and other medical waste.

"A person is a person is a person, no matter how small!" – Dr. Seuss

In 2011, my own daughter had a miscarriage. With the triplets on my mind and my daughter's miscarriage, I felt like screaming: "Somebody should do something about this." And then I realised that I was somebody.

In 2012, I raised a parliamentary questionnaire about this issue. I was a guest speaker at Legacy Parks, near Stellenbosch, where we planted a tree in commemoration of the little babies who never got to be buried or cremated, because they were not regarded as viable after birth. I was also invited to be a guest speaker at the Healing Concert in Artscape during August 2013 where I addressed a huge audience on the topic. And in 2015, I decided to proceed with a constitutional challenge. I formed the non-profit organisation, Voice of the *Unborn Baby*, because I realised that as an individual, I would get nowhere. A cause was also registered on Causes.com and so far over 2 000 signatures have been collected in support of this legislative change.

My legal team has been appointed to take on this constitutional challenge. We want expecting parents, from all walks of life, who suffer pregnancy loss and wish to say goodbye to their hoped-for child in a dignified fashion, to be allowed to do so. My counsel is currently interviewing experts on the subject and they've also invited the various ministers of Home Affairs, the Department of Health and the Department of Environmental Affairs to a round table discussion before the application is launched with the high court.

Should the application on behalf of the *Voice of the Unborn Baby* succeed in the high court, the constitutional court must still ratify it. If you would like to help, please go to Causes.com and make your signature count, because unborn babies, irrespective of gestational age, are NOT medical waste!

Recommended Reading: When Hello means Goodbye, a book written by Paul Kirk and Pat Schwiebert. It is a guide for parents whose child dies before birth, at birth, or shortly after birth.

Sources: www.october15th.com
<https://www.causes.com/campaigns/323-let-the-mother-of-a-miscarried-baby-have-choices-with-regards-to-burial-cremation>