Letter from the Editor

The Versatility of the Perinatal Educator

Abstract

Perinatal educators can expand their role beyond that of childbirth preparation. One such role is the perinatal bereavement counselor. Having the courage to balance one's skills with one's intuitive impulses may greatly enrich carrying out this or any role.

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Perinatal educators who are heavily focused on their skills of preparing parents for childbirth sometimes do not think to promote or offer themselves as the versatile clinical perinatal specialists they have become. Other perinatal educators have taken courses such as the Lamaze International Advanced Skills Series and have expanded their focus to preparation for breastfeeding, working with adolescents, or preparing parents for parenthood. However, unless they have attended special courses for expanded roles beyond childbirth education, some perinatal educators may not be aware of the roles they can assume. One such role is that of perinatal bereavement counselor. The following letter sent to the *Journal of Perinatal Education* illustrates what a perinatal bereavement counselor can accomplish when she combines her skills with a trust in her own intuition.

I am a nurse at a community hospital in a beautiful county in Pennsylvania. I have been working in the Obstetrics Department for 16 years. I have worn many hats in my career—Staff Nurse, Sibling Educator, and Tot Trax State Health Immunization Program Coordinator. My newest cap is that of a Resolve Through Sharing Bereavement Counselor. Having lost two pregnancies through miscarriage, I have always known the need for this; but, whoever thought I would fulfill my dream?

I was on one such visit to the funeral home to comfort a husband and wife who had a heavy-hearted history of loss. A year prior, they lost a daughter born prematurely with a ravaging respiratory infection. These people were also infertility patients who not only faced the pain of losing a daughter but also wondered if they could ever achieve pregnancy again. They found a wonderful specialist in Pittsburgh who agreed to take them on. Sure enough, she was pregnant again . . . with triplets! Around this time our Bereavement Support Group started and I invited her to come. She was happy to come, having much to share. She soon learned she was carrying twins; her body had absorbed one of the triplets. Again, she was faced with a loss of a totally different kind. She was so excited about the twins she resolved herself to the fact that she would have two healthy babies. At her twenty-second week of pregnancy, she came to our facility with her bag of water broken on one twin. We immediately transferred her to Pittsburgh to her specialist. Both twins and Mom were stable, requiring bedrest, steroids, antibiotics, and most importantly, time. One week later, she delivered. The twins had pneumonia. The daughter, Jerica, lived for four hours and died in her mother's arms. The son, Jared, is still alive at this writing, responding to antibiotics and being maintained on an oscillating ventilator.

Knowing all this history of the couple, I wanted to provide whatever help and support I could at the funeral home for whoever needed me. I found out after arriving that the couple could not leave Jared. He had become more critical, and they needed to be with their son. No funeral service would take place until the parents could be involved. For that night, the family and minister decided on a Bereavement Service. I had never attended one or heard of such a service.

We were all seated, and the minister, well known to me from the community, began to offer a beautiful service of comfort and hope. He welcomed participation from any attendees to make remarks. I felt the need to speak. I walked to the podium totally unprepared to introduce myself. I became quite choked up as I looked at friends, neighbors, and past OB patients whom I had helped through their labors and deliveries. I hesitated and became tearful. I felt the minister's warm, comforting hand on my back and began to talk.

"Hello, I am Patty Lavan. I am a Registered Nurse at Somerset Hospital. I am also a Bereavement Counselor and friend. I am sorry I am not prepared and quite tearful. We had three births at the hospital prior to my coming here this evening, and now I need to speak about death.

"Babies don't die; children are to outlive us, to laugh, and play. I hope all of you remember that with God's love and through prayer, we can get through anything." Suddenly, from nowhere I could name, I felt compelled to sing. I told those gathered, "I'd like for you all to sing with me the first verse of 'Amazing Grace.' " We all joined together, and everyone sang out. After singing, I reminded them, "Please remember prayer is our best implement to hope and fulfillment. So pray like you've never prayed before. Thank you."

I returned to my chair a little shaken wondering if I had done the right thing. I had made these people, some my former patients, cry. I looked out, and a few sobbed very hard, while their husbands comforted them. The service ended with The Lord's Prayer. The lady sitting beside me was one of my Bereavement patients and a Support Group Member. I remember her exact words: "That was beautiful." I sat in my chair for what seemed like an eternity while others were milling around. I stood and turned. A young woman, I cannot tell you who she was, called me by name and thanked me, telling me I was sent by angels. I remember feeling her tears on my shoulder.

I now realize that what I did came spontaneously and from the bottom of my heart; it was helpful and cathartic for me. The tears I shed for the parents of Jerica and Jared were shed in unison. The tears were my dreams, hopes,

and fantasies. The angel wasn't me. He was sent that night to help us all.

Sincerely,
Patricia E. Lavan

The above letter not only speaks of another role to which perinatal educators can expand their practice; it also speaks of the courage to carry out this role—or any role—in an instinctive, heartfelt manner. There appears to be a lesson for us all. Regardless of where we credit the source of our intuitive inclinations, there are times when life is enriched and more meaningful if we have the courage to act accordingly. Asking this of ourselves is not very different from asking expectant mothers to trust their bodies to know how to give birth.

—Sharron S. Humenick, RN, Ph.D., FAAN