Families Without Mothers: Exploring Life after Maternal Death

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In 2015, over 300,000 women lost their lives due to pregnancy-related complications worldwide. That is over 800 women per day. These deaths are a tragic loss for the surviving child and the father, as well as the extended family. What is currently known about the phenomenon of maternal death is primarily in the form of statistical data. While the problem has been analyzed in quantitatively, no qualitative exploration of the phenomenon currently exists in U.S. literature. Findings from this qualitative case study will provide a valuable window into the lifeworld of fathers and guardians, as well as implications for health care practitioners.

This study sought to uncover a previously unexplored aspect of maternal death, the stories of children and families left behind. By replacing numbers with stories, we sought to personalize the problem, raise awareness, and identify needs. The study sought to answer the following questions: What happens to the children left behind after maternal death? What is the impact on the surviving family and on the community as a whole?

Purpose

Data was collected via in-depth, semi-structured interviews with fathers and family members following maternal deaths. Interview guides were used only to initiate conversation, with probing, clarifying questions growing out of subsequent dialogue as it emerged, in order to elicit as much detail as possible. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis.

Using interpretive phenomenological analysis, we explore in depth fathers’ experiences during the weeks and months following the death of the infants’ mothers, including infant hospitalization, legal battles, and the struggle to adjust to life as a widowed father. This study highlights critical needs for support, as well as how those needs are met, or in some cases left unmet.

Research Methodology

Data is imperative that health care practitioners treating women during pregnancy make every effort to include fathers throughout the pregnancy, educate fathers as to the mother’s high risk health concerns, and be prepared to provide local sources of support in the event of maternal death. Practitioners should also be aware that support needs continue to be high throughout the infant’s first year of life. Extended family and friends may be involved in the infant’s health care in order to help fill the maternal role.

Clinical Significance

- Theme 1: Grief
  - Being Alone: Relentless Absence
  - Struggle to understand what happened
  - Struggle to move forward
  - Perseverance: “Doing What You Have to Do”

- Theme 2: Filling Mother’s Shoes
  - Guardianship/Legal Battle
  - Striving for Childhood Normality
  - Health Care Providers as Foster Parents

- Theme 3: Support
  - Excess Charity
  - Forced Psychological Support
  - Meaningful Support: Faith, Private Donations, Childcare, Government Assistance

- Theme 4: Burden of Guilt
  - Squandered Last Goodbye
  - Sweating the Small Stuff
  - Anticipating Child Guilt

References: