

Families Without Mothers: Exploring Life after Maternal Death

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Purpose

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?

Research Methodology

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.

Clinical Significance

It 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.

Themes

- 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

I still don't really understand what happened. I remember them telling me, but it's just a lot of stuff that I really don't understand. I wish I did.

You just have to do whatever it takes to get them to sleep, to get them to eat, to get them to do what they need to do to function. You have to do whatever it takes.

It's been pretty rough. I can't put it behind me, I been trying to put it behind me and move forward, but it's just hard. After you been with somebody that long it's like, it ain't just gonna leave overnight."

All the nurses in the NICU, they help me when I come in. That male nurse told me, 'Grab him, you not gonna break him!' And that made me feel comfortable."

I just want them to have a normal life.

And I am doing more like what mothers do. Like I've been going shopping for the kids. Just doing stuff that the mother use to do. It's, hard but, I don't, I try not to think about it as hard, you know."

I'm the parent, but I'm not the mom.

All the doctors came and gave us a hug. They were all crying because they had invested themselves in my family. They cared about what was happening.

Emotional support, coming from a real genuine place, really helped.

I'm very real about all of it. I'm not in denial, a lot of people were like, "You do realize what happened?" "Please talk to us about it." But I don't need to talk...

A lady that sends us \$30 every month for diapers! I had to put a stop to the food though. I just didn't have room to put it, so many people brought so much food.

The last I spoke to her was when I left. (crying) That haunts me today. I didn't tell her, "I love you," or anything.

All these little nitpicking stuff, it isn't worth it. I wish I had all the aggravations back. All the stupid little things, I'd take them all back just to have her back.

When she (baby) starts putting it all together, her birthday, and her mama's death... I just hope that won't affect her.

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