

Fathers and fertility: a miscarriage of justice

Like William Hague, Andrew Don lost several babies. But his grief was compounded when friends focused only on his wife's pain

My heart goes out to William Hague, who has been forced into divulging "many difficulties and... multiple miscarriages" for I, too, have known the devastation of trying for a baby time after time to no avail.

It is hard enough for the Foreign Secretary to have to deal with the rumours about his sex life, but to be pressurised into revealing the struggle he and his wife Fiona have endured to have children is, to my mind, even worse.

Miscarriage and infertility remain two of life's last taboos and it takes a major story such as this to break for people to talk about it.

Both are as terrible for the man as they are for the woman, but sympathy naturally gravitates towards the female because she is the one who carries the baby. Males are regarded as convenient adjuncts, the lesser of the two halves, who fertilise the egg and then pop down the pub.

I wrote about this issue in 2005 for my book, *Fathers Feel Too*, which focused on men who had lost babies either during pregnancy, at birth or shortly after.

The common theme of every man's story I recounted was society's expectation that they should be the strong one, the person to support their partner and this was an expectation endemic in families and in the health service, not just at home but internationally, too.

Our final attempt to have a baby ended some time between June 3 and June 4 1997, when what should have been my little girl... my hope, my future, my light, lost the fight for life after five months in my wife Liz's womb.

It took me years before I felt strong enough to share my story. The actor David Haig summed it up in the foreword when he wrote that "for every grief-stricken mother, there is a father struggling to articulate his own despair".

His words perfectly reflected how I felt, indeed, how I still feel about our battle to conceive, which lasted for much of the 1990s and which, even now, brings tears to my eyes as I remember one minute staring at the outline of Lara Jean on the ultrasound, the next, looking at blackness as one of the nurses flicked the switch.

My girl had looked almost big enough to say, "Hello world, here I come." She was beautiful. She was dead.

When I was ten years old my best friend's brother kicked me in the groin. One of the most physically painful things I remember. Now it felt like he was back kicking me in the same place in perpetuity. It felt like some omnipotent being had thrust its hand deep inside me and twisted and pulled until all my hopes, dreams and everything I had ever wanted were ripped out.

My wife went through far more physically than me, of course. She had pre-eclampsia (a pregnancy-induced hypertension that can lead to eclampsia, where a seizure occurs). She had been in hospital to monitor this but the condition was mismanaged and she was lucky to come through it.

We knew after this there would be no other children. This was our last chance after several fertility treatments and midnight dashes to Chelsea and Westminster hospital at the optimum time.

I will never forget the consultant who looked at us both after yet another

failed cycle of treatment: "The drugs don't work." I hummed in reference to the Verve. He did not get it.

I was stunned when many of the condolences my wife received did not mention me. Condolence letters addressed to "Dear Liz" made me feel worthless. No one acknowledged or even seemed interested in what was the worst pain of my life, save my father and a couple of close friends and Liz, who had her own demons to deal with.

I remember shortly after the miscarriage breaking down when speaking to a close relative, who said something to the effect that I should be strong for my wife. Be strong for my wife! Who was going to be strong for me? Who was going to understand my grief when I woke up every day for the following two years in the early hours of the morning, remembering all over again that we had been so close... so close to Lara Jean being a viable baby. But not close enough.

For five months I had sung *Baby Face* and told my corniest jokes, head pressed against Liz's stomach. As I wrote in my book, "I was your regular one-man cabaret".

Erica Stewart, head of bereavement support for Sands, the stillbirth and neonatal death charity, says: "When a baby dies it often seems as if all the attention is focused on the mother. Fathers' feelings of grief are overlooked. Many fathers put their feelings on hold and get through by focusing on supporting the mother. Other people assume that men will be strong and just keep going."

Stewart says that men are taught from a young age not to cry, but bereaved fathers need permission to grieve too; they are usually the ones who have to take care of all the practical things while they are dealing with their own emotions.

I was one of those men who always wanted to be a dad, to give one or more children a loving, stable family, enjoy

holidays together, picnics in the park, Monopoly on rainy Sunday afternoons.

Soon it becomes old news. You go out with friends for a drink but their laughter is hollow, the small talk, banal, nothing matters anymore. I wanted to talk about it, to make people understand, but I gave up after a while. It makes people uncomfortable. They do not know what to say.

So eight years later my book was published and I made people listen on TV and in the press. The typical reaction to my book was that at last someone had acknowledged what men go through. I know my book has been read by medical professionals and has been sold as far afield as Israel. But has anything changed? I suspect not much.

I feel for William Hague, but his statement to the press does create another opportunity for men like me who want to push this subject out from under the carpet and get people talking about it.

Why should men hold back their emotions? Many of us are compassionate, sensitive and good listeners, not John Wayne or Charles Bronson.

So we do not have wombs! We do have hearts. As Stewart says: "Society needs to recognise that miscarriage, stillbirth and neonatal death affects both parents and their families. It's a little life, not a little loss."

Finally, for all William Hague's discomfort about the attention given to his personal life, I hope some good might come from it. I am pleased that the Foreign Secretary says that the stress of infertility has bought him and his wife closer together. It did the same for me and Liz. We adopted two older children at the turn of the millennium and all the difficulties that have been associated with this have brought us closer together rather than torn us apart. But that, as they say, is another story.

Contact Sands, the stillbirth and neonatal death charity, on 020-7436 5881 or see sands-uk.org