

[WOMB WITH A VIEW]

Every week, a woman reflects on motherhood – whether she has children or not

‘I DIDN’T STOP FEELING LIKE A MOTHER JUST BECAUSE MY BABY DIED’

When *Jessica Clasby-Monk*, 31, lost her baby in 2016 she still felt like a mother – even if others refused to acknowledge that...



When my wife Natalie and I look back on our memories with Leo, we tend to think of two specific moments: either the Sunday he was born or the

Thursday before that – the day we found out that he had died.

It was at 37 weeks pregnant that I woke from a nap and realised that I wasn't feeling the baby move. I got myself into all his preferred positions, prodded him and found his feet, but still there was absolutely no movement. I knew something wasn't right, so we went to the local Maternity Assessment Unit – they tried to find his heartbeat but he was already dead.

Leo was stillborn three days later. After I'd delivered him, the hospital gave me and Natalie a few days with him before we had to say our goodbyes – time I'll always be grateful for. We held him in a blanket and instinctively rocked him back and forth, patting his back as if to help him fall asleep. We asked the midwife assistant to take a photo of the three of us; it is our one and only family photo with him.

Natalie and I have known each other

since we were at school – but it was in 2009 that we reconnected online, and were married two years later. Our first year as newly-weds was spent in the Scottish Highlands before moving to Oxfordshire at the end of 2012; this marked the start of our journey to become parents, which we were incredibly excited about. As a gay couple we knew our path would be complicated, so we did a lot of research and saved for three cycles of natural IUI (intrauterine insemination). When that failed we moved on to privately funded IVF, and on our second cycle, we became pregnant.

When we lost Leo, our movements around the hospital were handled with care and consideration by the staff. We were taken via the staff route from the bereavement ward to our room so that we very rarely heard a baby cry or a woman in labour scream. That little space became our cocoon – our safety net.

Once we were out in the big wide world, however, things were different. I was going through the dual trauma of childbirth and grief – all of which had happened in such a short period of time – and there didn't seem to be anyone on hand to offer me professional advice.

We had been part of an NCT group but stopped all contact after Leo died, because I knew that seeing babies and parents living the life we should have had would have been too hard. No one invited me to my

post-natal six-week check but I made myself go anyway because, honestly, I was curious to see what they would say. The answer was very little: the GP clearly didn't know what to say to me. I was in desperate need of care, but even as I sat in front of a qualified healthcare professional, my needs as a mother went unrecognised. All this because I was a mother without any visible proof of my baby.

I had gone through a full-term pregnancy, labour and loss, and yet there was no plan or procedure in place to help me mentally or physically. I was discharged so quickly, I felt like people just wanted to do the paperwork and send me on my way.

Friends and family showed their support at Leo's funeral. We held an informal reception afterwards in the same room that we had married in and it was lovely. I needed to know that people cared about Leo, and for them to know that



Jessica with Leo's footprint



PREGNANCY AFTER LOSS BROUGHT UP SUCH EXTREME EMOTIONS

possible outcome of pregnancy, even in a medical setting where we were specifically discussing fertility. It's always hard to explain the situation, but to not even be given the option? That made us feel like we weren't normal parents.

Nine months after Leo died I became pregnant with Eli. Pregnancy after loss brought up such extreme emotions. It was like placing myself at the epicentre of my own trauma and staying there 24/7 for nine months, without respite. I was admitted to hospital at 35 weeks due to anxiety and my concerns about a slight slowing in Eli's growth. Thankfully, my consultant understood; I was induced soon afterwards and gave birth to Eli, who is now 18 months old.

Now, we naturally include Leo in our family life. Eli wears 'little brother' T-shirts, we fundraise and blog in Leo's name, talk about him, point him out in our picture and sing songs about Eli's wonderful big brother. He has visited Leo's grave with us since he was three weeks old.

It took a lot of empowerment for me to own the title of 'mother' when Leo died. I think part of the problem was that no one knew how best to acknowledge him – or us – in the right way. When people ask if Eli is my first, I tend to say something along the lines of 'we had a little boy before him, but he died' or 'he didn't get to come home with us'. I've now learned that as the mother you've got to lead the way and educate those around you – only then will people learn to respond in a way that is helpful to you.

If you need information or support following a stillbirth, visit the charity sands.org.uk

he mattered and that he was real.

But going back to his bedroom at home was difficult. So many people told us to just shut the door and not go in, but instead we tidied up, added some gifts we had received and put up all his cards just as we would have done if he'd lived. We've ended up keeping everything we had bought him.

We knew straight away that we

would try to get pregnant again; we had two frozen embryos from Leo's treatment cycle and had always intended to try again. And yet, when I started going through IVF again, I filled out a form and realised that there was no box to tick in order to explain that I had already had a child but that Leo had been stillborn. It was yet another stark reminder that his birth story didn't fit the mould and wasn't deemed a