**ISA ISPID  
  
Abstract Submission  
  
Nº: 255**

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| Topics: **Stillbirth** |
| Type: **Poster** |
| **Stillbirth and perinatal care: an Italian professional perspective** |
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| **Introduction** Perinatal loss is a traumatic event that can dramatically change the life of parents and families. The available evidence shows that perinatal health care professionals (HCPs) play a pivotal role in the psychological management of the event and in preventing the onset of complicated grief.  **Objectives**: To assess current practices of Italian HCPs with regard to stillbirth management and to explore HCPs’ need to be trained in supporting bereaved families.  **Material and Methods** Between 2009 and 2015, 650 HCPs routinely involved in perinatal care, working in obstetric and maternity hospital units in 14 Italian cities, were administered the specifically developed 39-item multiple-choice questionnaire “Lucina Interview”. The results related to the items exploring behaviours and emotions of HCPs, and their opinions regarding the need for professional training courses are reported.  **Results** Out of 650 questionnaires distributed, 574 were completed and returned (response rate: 88.3%). The majority of HCPs (92.9%) were female, the average working years were 14.3±11.1, and mean age was 38.1±10.9 years. Midwives were largely represented (63.8%), 14.1% were gynaecologists, 8.9% were nurses, and 6.1% trainees. A minority (7.1%) was represented by other professional figures, including residents, healthcare assistants and psychologists. In case of a stillbirth, half of the HCPs participating in the survey (50.9%) routinely allow parents to see their baby, whereas one quarter reported that, in their opinion, letting parents see the baby is not an example of good care practice, and 15.9% admitted to not knowing which practice should be adopted. Less than half (41.8%) reported bathing the child: one fifth (21.6%) were unsure and one quarter (26.8%) did not consider bathing the child is a good care practice. With regard to creating mementos as part of compassionate bereavement care for parents, only a little more than one fourth (27.9) routinely takes photos of the stillborn baby, one third (32.2%) never takes photo and another third (32.6%) were unsure. Almost half (42.2%) felt inadequate to face the critical situation and 8.0% felt to have failed to provide support to the family when dealing with an intrauterine foetal death in the past. Communicating the news of the death was recognized as the greatest emotional challenge for them (92.7%).  An interest to attend perinatal bereavement training courses was expressed by the large majority (74.0%): being trained in perinatal loss support could help them improve their daily practice, according to 72.5% of survey participants; attending regular meetings with other HCPs would make two thirds (65%) change their own approach towards critical situations. However, almost two thirds (60.1%) had never previously attended a training course on perinatal bereavement.  **Conclusions** The findings from our survey highlighted that there is a substantial gap between the standards of care defined by the international guidelines (e.g. allowing bereaved parents to have contact with their stillborn baby, collecting mementos, etc.) and the actual practices in place in Italy. Italian perinatal HCPs feel an urgent need to be offered professional training courses to better meet the needs of the grieving families. |
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