

Communication and Care Gaps After Perinatal Loss in Ukraine: A Qualitative Study of Parents' Experiences

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Background

Perinatal loss is associated with elevated **depression, anxiety, and PTSD** among bereaved parents. Its impact may be exacerbated by **insensitive communication** and inadequate hospital conditions during acute care.

Research within **Ukrainian healthcare settings remains scarce**, particularly in the context of the ongoing war.

Aim

To explore how parents perceived **delivery of bad news, interactions with healthcare professionals, and organization of care** after perinatal loss in Ukraine.

Methods

Design: Qualitative interview study

Participants: N = 21 bereaved parents (17 women, 4 men)

Recruitment: Parents recruited retrospectively and prospectively through parent support organisations (Angel Care NGO, Early Birds NGO) and clinicians at Maternity House No.6, Kyiv, Ukraine (March–October 2025)

Method: Thematic analysis of semi-structured in-depth key informant interviews

Analysis: Braun & Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis; independent coding by two researchers

Ethics: Bogomolets National Medical University; Protocol No.165, 05.12.2022

Participants' Voices

"They just told me the heartbeat was gone and left."

R7 — Care gap: abrupt and unsupported disclosure

"One doctor just sat beside me in silence — that meant more than any words."

R15 — Protective factor: empathic presence

"I wanted someone to say: here is what happens now, here is what comes next."

R5 — Care gap: absence of structured information

"I thought that if I showed how much it hurt me, it would be even worse for her."

R21 — Partner experience: suppressed grief

Recommendations

- **Protocol Development:** Prioritize systemic bereavement processes
- **Workforce Training:** Implement trauma-informed communication for all staff
- **Partner Support:** Ensure access to psychological care for both parents
- **Contextual Adaptation:** Account for war-specific obstacles to mourning and rituals

Results: Key Themes Across Four Domains

Eight themes were identified across four domains.

■ CLINICAL (Themes 1–3)

• Theme 1: Nature of medical communication

- Formal or stigmatizing disclosure; no explanation of next steps; left alone during/after delivery; isolated empathic moments from individual staff

• Theme 2: Retraumatizing environment

- Placed alongside postpartum mothers; exposure to infant sounds; lack of private space

• Theme 3: Information gaps

- No guidance on physical recovery, lactation, farewell options or referral to psychological support

■ PSYCHOLOGICAL (Themes 4–5)

• Theme 4: Unmet support needs

- Need for structured information, farewell ritual options and psychological referral; readiness to accept support widely expressed

• Theme 5: Systemic barriers

- No separate rooms; poor team coordination; staff unaware of loss; absence of bereavement protocols

■ PARTNER RELATIONSHIP (Themes 6–7)

• Theme 6: Impact on couple dynamics

- Gender differences in grieving: men rationalized or withdrew; women sought shared processing; mismatches led to tension and isolation

• Theme 7: Both partners need support

- Psychological help offered only to mothers; couple sessions seen as beneficial; anxiety around subsequent pregnancy

■ SOCIAL (Theme 8)

• Theme 8: Social and cultural barriers

- Family and friends often avoided discussing the loss; the event was frequently framed through religious interpretations; grief was shaped by social taboos surrounding child death, and parents reported a lack of community-level support for bereavement.

Table 1. Key themes and sub-themes identified through thematic analysis.

Conclusions

Our findings provide insight into the unmet needs of parents whose baby died before, during or shortly after birth in Ukraine, which entail lack of:

- Standards for **sensitive, trauma-informed communication**
- Coordinated, step-by-step **information delivery**
- Options for **memory-making** and farewell rituals
- **Lactation guidance** for bereaved mothers
- **Psychological support** for both partners

Implementing **bereavement care pathways** is a critical step toward improving well-being of parents after perinatal loss in