



Who Decides If Unborn Lives Matter?

Recent news stories reveal a contradictory attitude to how we treat unborn lives in our society.

It was reported [in the news last week](#) that parents in England who have experienced the devastation of losing a baby before 24 weeks of pregnancy can apply for a 'baby loss certificate' [from 22 February of this year](#). The very next day, however, [the Health Secretary revealed](#) she would support [an amendment](#) to decriminalise women who procure an abortion beyond 24 weeks, on which [MPs will get a free vote](#) next month along with another amendment to lower the 'upper' legal abortion limit from 24 to 22 weeks.

Is an unborn baby to be cherished and mourned if it is lost, or it is something that can be terminated up to birth? We cannot have it both ways.

The Anscombe Bioethics Centre supports and welcomes the efforts to support parents who experience miscarriage. Around a quarter of a million miscarriages are thought to occur every year in the country.

One of the independent [Pregnancy Loss Review's recommendations](#) was the introduction of baby loss certificates to provide parents, on a voluntary basis, with official recognition of their deceased baby or babies. So far, applicants who were living in England at the time of their loss can already apply for a certificate and there are plans to introduce them in Wales soon. In Scotland there is [a memorial book](#), created by the Scottish government and National Records of Scotland, where parents can record any miscarriages that occur before 24 weeks and receive a certificate if requested.

Death certificates of babies who die after 24 weeks in the womb (i.e. stillbirths) already exist, but until recently there was no official certificate to document a death before that point in the pregnancy. Hence, it is good that the different parts of the United Kingdom are seeking to provide comfort to grieving parents who want their loss in early pregnancy to receive official recognition. It is also good that improvements to maternity care and birth trauma support are a priority in the Government's [women's health strategy](#) in England.

These are sensitive and thoughtful ways to support parents. By stark contrast, to decriminalise women who procure an abortion after 24 weeks flies in the face of the apparent recognition that a miscarriage is the loss of a baby, of a person who was to be loved but is mourned instead.

But both news stories have something in common: whether the unborn baby has status as a person is thought to depend on the parents recognising its personhood or not. If the mother mourns for her lost baby, she may voluntarily request a certificate. If she does not choose to recognise her baby as a person, she may be permitted (the current proposals succeed) to terminate its life with an abortion at any stage of the pregnancy for any reason.

A humane society is one in which our status as persons with dignity and rights is recognised to be innate, and given simply by virtue of being a human being. Every human life is a person. All persons have dignity. We do not receive our dignity by being the citizen of any state, nor by our dignity being recognised by any other person. Hence, parents cannot decide to deny the dignity and rights of their unborn children, just as the government cannot strip the parents of their dignity and rights.

Our society's growing support for parents who suffer the loss of their baby is already pointing to the truth: that a life lost is mourned for because it is a life that must be cherished, not ended.

END

Notes to Editors:

- Any part of the above can be quoted as coming from our Public Bioethics Fellow, Dr Mehmet Çiftçi.
- For more background information on this issue, see the Anscombe Centre's [Bioethics in Brief on Abortion](#).
- For more information on the Anscombe Bioethics Centre, see our website: www.bioethics.org.uk
- For interviews or comment, contact: media@bioethics.org.uk