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## The AlignMNH 2023 Conference: progress in raising parents' voices in stillbirth advocacy.

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## The AlignMNH 2023 Conference: progress in raising parents' voices in stillbirth advocacy

The first International Maternal Newborn Health Conference, organised by AlignMNH, took place on May 8–11, 2023, in Cape Town (South Africa). During this conference, more than 1800 stakeholders from over 95 countries gathered to refocus, realign, and protect progress to enhance global maternal and newborn health and prevent stillbirths. Globally, approximately 1.9 million babies are stillborn in the third trimester each year.<sup>1</sup> These statistics represent not just numbers, but the lives of parents, families, and health-care workers who are deeply impacted by stillbirth.

Ongoing stigma and taboo surrounding stillbirth present significant barriers to the provision of compassionate care and support.<sup>2,3</sup> Overcoming this stigma requires open discussions and a shift in societal attitudes. Raising parent voices through the International Stillbirth Alliance and parent support groups—as emphasised during the conference and the launch of the new Global Stillbirth Advocacy and Implementation Guide<sup>4</sup>—is one way to achieve this.

During the 2023 conference opening plenary,<sup>5</sup> Treasure Lwantale bravely shared the story of the death of her baby boy Mwezi in 2021. Mwezi was stillborn at 38 weeks' gestation after Treasure presented to health services due to concerns about Mwezi's movements. Treasure's story was both heartbreaking and inspiring, shedding light on Treasure's positive and negative experiences with health-care workers, and highlighting systemic gaps in antenatal and intrapartum care. Although many conference attendees appeared grateful for hearing Treasure's story, some experienced distress.

The parent voice remains an invaluable tool to drive progress in

improving care and maternal and newborn health outcomes; conference organisers should continue to provide opportunities for parents to share their stories. At the same time, conference organisers should consider providing safe, quiet reflective spaces for attendees to process re-emerging grief and connect with others; integrating mental health services as part of wellbeing support for attendees who have faced loss or vicarious trauma following stillbirth, including health workers; ensuring that parents have an equal place at the table as strategic partners, organisers, speakers, and panel members; and providing a trigger warning in the conference information package or opening sessions to prepare attendees for challenging content.

Most of the authors of this correspondence have personally experienced the devastating loss of a baby. It is our aspiration that by fostering dialogue, providing support, and amplifying the voices of those affected, we can collectively work to reduce stillbirth rates and improve the wellbeing of all those affected by stillbirth.

We report no competing interests.

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1 United Nations Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation. Never forgotten: the situation of stillbirth around the globe. New York, NY: United Nations Children's Fund, 2023.

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