

Parents call for stillbirths to be investigated

Lucy Bannerman

Two health professionals whose daughter died during labour after a series of hospital failures have called for coroners to be given power to investigate stillbirths.

Sarah Hawkins and her husband Jack said that it was "absolutely ridiculous" that baby deaths in England and Wales only merited the independent scrutiny of a coroner's court if the child was alive when born.

Their daughter, Harriet, died in April last year, at 37 weeks, after errors by Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust, including repeatedly denying Mrs Hawkins admission to hospital and

in the NHS all our careers. We wanted to tell them what they needed to know, to make sure it wouldn't happen again."

The couple were told there would be no inquest because the law states that a stillborn child or foetus is not a "deceased person". "As a mum, to be told that your daughter isn't defined as a person, because she wasn't born alive is absolutely ridiculous. She had been kicking around, and had her foot under my ribs for months," said Mrs Hawkins.

The couple said they were told by the trust that Harriet's death was caused by an infection. It was only after challenging that and pushing for an external review that the death was "upgraded" to a serious untoward incident (SUI).

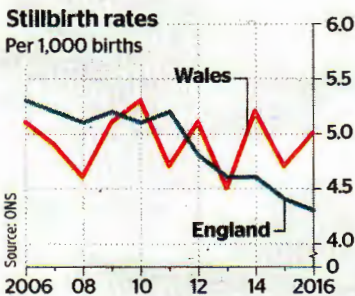
"It has been battle after battle after battle," said Mrs Hawkins. "We don't want sorrys. We want answers." Mr Hawkins, 48, said: "I don't think they really had a clue that the death of a baby in labour was a major incident. Their attitude was very laissez faire."

Peter Homa, chief executive of the trust, has apologised but denied a cover-up. "I reiterate my condolences to Jack and Sarah and acknowledge the unimaginable distress and sadness caused by Harriet's death," he said.

"I apologise unreservedly that their pain has been worsened knowing that, had the shortcomings in care late in Sarah's pregnancy not been experienced, Harriet might be alive today."

The couple believe their daughter might have lived had inquests been held into previous stillbirths at the trust. They want the law to be brought in line with Northern Ireland where coroners can investigate stillbirths.

Mrs Hawkins vowed to keep campaigning. "We want to get justice for Harriet but also for all the other parents before us, and after us," she said.



failing to declare an obstetric emergency. Mrs Hawkins was in labour for five days and after being told the baby was dead had to wait nine hours before Harriet was delivered. Both worked for the trust, she as a senior physiotherapist and he as a consultant, but when they asked for an investigation they said they "were dismissed as mad, grieving parents".

Mrs Hawkins, 34, said: "It just felt they were saying, 'This is very sad, these things happen, now go away and grieve'. But we have both worked



Jack and Sarah Hawkins with Harriet