Fathers feel too

Andrew Don's world was shattered when his longed-for baby daughter, Lara Jean, died suddenly at five months' gestation

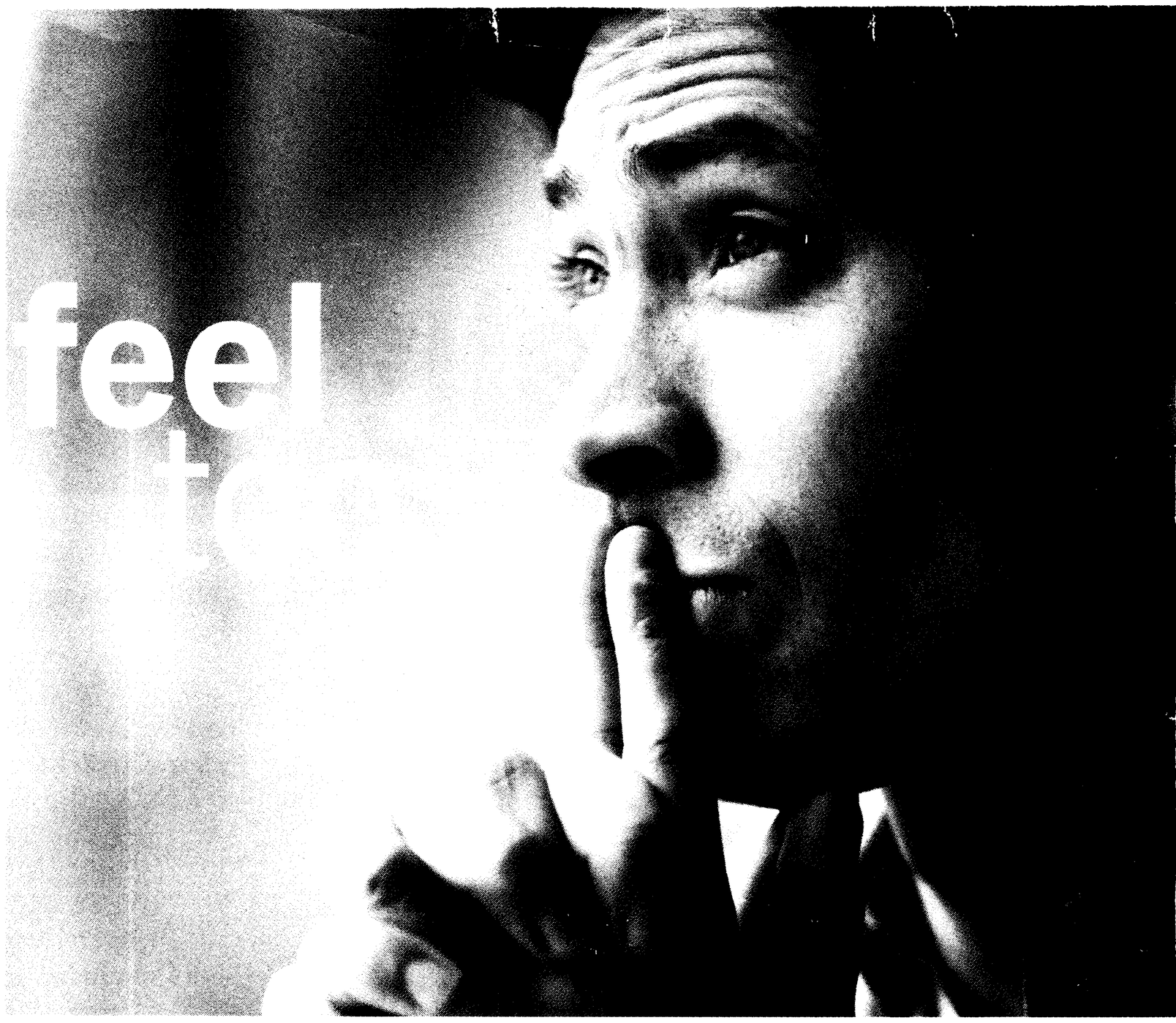

Photo: Posed by model

I always dreamed of having my own family. But on June 4 1997, that dream looked as if it would die forever. My little baby girl who had struggled to the fifth month in my beloved wife's womb was dead.

I remember the time – 2pm. I can see my wife's belly freshly wet with ultrasound gel and the stillness on the monitor where a tiny heart should have been beating. I let out a roar of grief and disbelief.

It was devastating for my wife: the frustration she had endured month after month, desperate to become pregnant; the indignities of fertility treatment, being prodded and poked; the sadness she felt on my behalf, knowing how much I, too, craved parenthood.

She got people's sympathy, and calls of support – and rightly so. A woman's grief on the death of a baby knows no bounds, after all.

But I was just a man. Men are macho; non-feeling.

At least that's the impression I got when many of the condolences Liz received did not even mention me – not even the one from the consultant addressed only to Mrs Don.

Few people acknowledged or even seemed interested in what was the worst pain of my whole life. This made me feel as if I was worth absolutely nothing.

What was I? An emotionless sex machine who did the deed and then disappeared to the pub?

'How's Liz?' people asked.

And I'm glad they did. But no one seemed to comprehend the enormity of *my* pain. Not only had I lost my baby, but I had to endure watching my wife go through emergency surgery after a catalogue of disasters at our local hospital that were reminiscent of something out of *Fawlty Towers*.

We had been so excited on discovering we were expecting. I leapt up and down on the bed waving the positive pregnancy test. But an early miscarriage three years before still felt raw. Would things really be different this time?

'As a man, I was expected to be strong for my wife'

When month three arrived we relaxed a little and allowed ourselves to tell everyone our happy news. And this I did with gusto - including the postman and the paper boy.

I'd sing Al Jolson's *Baby Face* with my head against Liz's womb. It was a precious time when, for a short while, anything and everything was possible.

Then suddenly, my dreams were destroyed. One minute I held all possibilities in my hand. The next, nothing.

I wasn't asking for the earth. I just wanted to be a dad.

I was left with the strong message that it's acceptable for women to grieve and seek support, but as a man, I was expected to be strong for my wife, have a stiff upper lip and keep my anguish and despair to myself.

Well, that's not me and that's not most men. I've now spoken to many men who also felt that most of the sympathy was reserved for their partners and they were expected to hold everything together.

Men should know it's all right to cry; it's fine to head-butt the wall; you're allowed to crumble – yes, Fathers Feel Too.

This is 2005, not 1905. Men have increasingly taken on a nurturing role as well as their stereotypical protector role over the past decades.

Sometimes the wife will be the main breadwinner while her husband makes the children's packed lunches, ferries them to school, wipes their tears when they graze their knee.

So why have society's attitudes not caught up with the reality?

I know of one man who was at risk of drinking himself to death because he could not come to terms with his grief. Another drove along the motorway and just stopped, in the middle of the carriageway, sobbing. My experience and those of others I have contacted show there is a serious education job to be done.

My story has a happy ending. We went on to adopt and today we have two beautiful, remarkable children and I now have the family I longed for. But still I ask people to remember – fathers feel too.

Andrew Don

In a new book *Fathers Feel Too*, Andrew Don tells the stories of 10 men whose babies have died. The book costs £7.99 plus £2 p&p, and is available from SANDS (Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society), 28 Portland Place, London W1B 1LY. Tel: 020 7436 7940.