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BC Coroners Service

INFANT DEATHS LINKED TO UNSAFE SLEEP PRACTICES

VICTORIA – In 88 per cent of sudden infant deaths recently reviewed, one or more unsafe sleep risk factors was identified, and the Child Death Review Unit of the BC Coroners Service is urging parents and caregivers to ensure infants are placed to sleep in a safe environment.

Last week, the unit completed the review of 33 sudden infant deaths, most of which occurred in 2005-2006.

“In 29 cases, we found evidence of at least one, sometimes multiple, unsafe sleep practices,” said Kellie Kilpatrick, director of the Child Death Review Unit. “Bed-sharing was the number one risk factor, and while we know that in a small number of cases, infants die suddenly during sleep with no explanation, these 29 cases demonstrate the critical need to educate parents and caregivers on how they can reduce the risks of preventable deaths.”

This is consistent with a preliminary review of infant deaths that occurred in 2007, which confirms that unsafe sleep practices continue to be risk factors seen in sudden infant deaths. These practices include unsafe sleep surfaces (adult beds or couches), unsafe sleep environments (bed-sharing, extraneous items including blankets and/or toys) and unsafe sleep positions (on stomach or side). The Child Death Review Unit’s (CDRU) full report on sudden infant deaths 2003-2007 will examine the trends seen in over 110 cases of unsafe sleep and is expected to be released later this year.

The CDRU supports and encourages parents and caregivers to follow the Canadian Pediatric Society’s recommendations on infant safe sleep environments, which were also included in the CDRU special report Infant Deaths 2003-2004, including:

- For the first year, an infant should sleep alone on its back in a crib that meets the Canadian government safety standards;
- Bed-sharing carries an increased risk of death for infants under one year of age, particularly if the mother is tired, sedated, under the influence of intoxicants and/or overweight;
- Room-sharing with an infant who has his own sleep surface is protective and preferable to bed-sharing;
- Waterbeds, couches, futons, air mattresses and “makeshift” beds should not be used;
- The sleep environment should be free of loose bedding, pillows, soft materials and bumper pads;
- Car seats and infant carriers should not replace the crib as a sleep surface. Safety harnesses may lead to increased risk of airway obstruction; and
- Exposure to cigarette smoke should be eliminated both before and after birth.

For more information on infant safe sleep practices, see the Canadian Pediatric Association website, www.cps.ca/english/statements/CP/cp04-02.pdf.

The B.C. Coroners Service is responsible for the investigation and review of all child deaths. It makes recommendations to improve public safety and prevent death in similar circumstances.

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Contact: Terry Foster
BC Coroners Service
604 660-7752