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MEDIA RELEASE

Shared sleeping associated with unexpected infant death

Parents and carers should be better educated about the suffocation risk posed by sleeping in a bed or on a sofa with an infant, according to Professor Roger Byard, a forensic pathologist from the University of Adelaide, in an editorial in the January issue of the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

Even though researchers have linked the practice to increased risk of infant death, shared sleeping – when an adult caregiver sleeps on the same surface as an infant – is still supported by some people as a way to encourage breastfeeding and enhance maternal–infant bonding and settling.

However it's been reported that 50% or more of infants who are found unexpectedly dead were sleeping with an adult – and infant mortality figures indicate that suffocation, not sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), may be the cause in some cases, Professor Byard wrote.

“If some of the risk factors for shared-sleeping death ... are examined in isolation... accidental suffocation appears to be a more likely mechanism of death than subtle processes leading to SIDS”.

Parental obesity, fatigue and soft sleeping surfaces are among the risk factors for shared-sleeping death and the problem applied to any shared-sleeping surface, not just to beds, according to Professor Byard.

Some infants are particularly vulnerable to the effects of compromised breathing, and there is often no clinical predictor of this vulnerability. Also, it's not necessary for an adult to be lying over an infant completely for respiration to be compromised, he wrote.

“It is generally agreed that in Western cultures, the safest place for an infant is in a cot that meets recommended safety features and is positioned beside the caregiver's bed.”

“Clinicians should discuss with caregivers the risk factors for accidental asphyxiation in shared-sleeping arrangements, such as sedation, excessive fatigue and hazards predisposing to suffocation. This may help prevent infant deaths in the future”, Professor Byard wrote.

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