



ACT Children & Young People  
Death Review Committee

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## MEDIA RELEASE

### **Children in the ACT continue to die in unsafe sleeping situations**

The ACT Children and Young People Death Review Committee has marked Children's Week by issuing its first fact sheet warning of the dangers of unsafe sleeping, including co-sleeping.

Committee Chair, Dr Penny Gregory, said that in the ACT and nationally babies and infants were continuing to die in preventable circumstances, including sleeping in situations where the risk of suffocation is high.

“The Committee has identified that since July 2004 more than 14 children have died in unsafe sleeping situations, particularly co-sleeping, with a number of further recent deaths still under review by the Coroner. All of these children were infants less than one year of age.

“This finding is extremely concerning and mirrors recent data coming out of New South Wales and New Zealand showing that the number of deaths involving co-sleeping is highest during the first year of life.”

“The New South Wales Child Death Review Team’s annual report 2012 released yesterday, found that 44% of the 480 infants that died suddenly and unexpectedly in NSW since 2003 were infants that were co-sleeping. Twenty-five of these deaths occurred in 2012.

The NSW report found that *“there is evidence to suggest that over 90 per cent of sudden and unexpected deaths in infancy are associated with preventable risk factors.”*

A copy of this report can be found at  
<http://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/news-and-publications/publications/annual-reports/nsw-child-death-review>

“In March 2013 the New Zealand Child and Youth Mortality Review Committee released a special report on the dangers of unsafe sleeping entitled *“Unintentional suffocation, foreign body inhalation and strangulation”*. This influential report included a review of the deaths of children in New Zealand that occurred in a place of sleep. Of the 50 children reviewed by the New Zealand Committee who died during sleep, 68% of these deaths occurred when co-sleeping.

The NZ report found *“that a considerable number of deaths that might have previously been labelled as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) are attributable to unsafe sleeping situations.”*

A copy of this report can be found at

<http://www.hqsc.govt.nz/assets/CYMRC/Publications/CMYRC-special-report-March-2013.pdf>.

Committee Chair, Dr Penny Gregory said that “the intention of the Committee is to examine this issue further and identify anything that will help to educate parents, professionals and the community on ways to reduce the likelihood of ACT children dying when asleep, including co-sleeping, in the future.

“There are currently a number of organisations who are giving out safe sleeping messages and the Committee would like to make sure that all families in the Canberra community with infant children receive and act on these messages.

“Sids and Kids’ have a great website at [www.sidsandkids.org/safe-sleeping](http://www.sidsandkids.org/safe-sleeping) that recommends that the safest place for a baby to sleep is in their own safe sleeping space, in the same room as their parent or caregiver, for the first six to twelve months of the baby’s life.

“Should someone still choose to co-sleep with an infant, there are some very important steps they can take to help reduce the risk to that infant

“A person should never co-sleep with an infant if

- the adult bed is unsafe, for example a sofa bed, couch or water bed
- they, or their partner, are under the influence of alcohol
- they, or their partner, are under the influence of prescription or recreational drugs, including marijuana
- they, or their partner, are exhausted
- they are a smoker, or if their partner smokes
- the infant was born prematurely or small
- there are other children or adults in the bed, or
- the infant could slip under adult bedding, such as a doona or pillow or down between the bed and the wall.

“It is worth remembering that countries with a long history of apparently successful co-sleeping have very different sleeping arrangements from ours in Australia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In these other countries, the bed is often the floor, or a similar very hard surface. There are no pillows, or only small firm pillows, which could not smother an infant accidentally. Similarly, blankets and bedding are small and thin.”

Dr Gregory said that a fact sheet about co-sleeping, including information about safe sleeping spaces for infants, can be found on the Committee’s website at [www.childdeathcommittee.act.gov.au](http://www.childdeathcommittee.act.gov.au).

Statement Ends

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