The wahakura and the safe sleeping environment

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Maori have always been grossly over-represented in SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome) deaths. The change from the prone to the back sleeping position has been associated with a huge decrease in post-neonatal deaths, but an increase in the disparities between Maori and non-Maori rates. This is because the primary risk factor for SIDS is now maternal smoking in pregnancy where the infant co-sleeps with an adult. Half of Maori mothers are smokers, many of whom sleep with their infants, and therein lies the problem. Of all the infants who died of SIDS/SUDI (sudden unexpected death in infancy) in the last five years, most of their mothers were smokers, well over half were in the parental bed and the others were in an unsafe cot/bassinet environment (bumpers and pillows) or an unsafe sleeping position (prone or side). In other words, vulnerable babies were in unsafe sleeping environments.

The huge majority of these babies lived with their otherwise normal and loving families, although most often in rather poor socioeconomic circumstances.

Whilst we should consistently advocate smoking cessation in pregnancy and a safer sleeping environment, this advice often proves difficult to effect. There is, however, a new pathway towards SIDS prevention that has a huge potential to mitigate the above risks. The wahakura concept is built around a traditional Maori infant sleeping practice and the 2005 American Academy of Pediatrics SIDS prevention recommendations. The placing of baby to sleep in this 14”x28” bassinet-like structure woven of flax seeks to reduce the risks inherent in the sleeping environment and, at the same time, appeal to the smoking Maori mother who might reject advice not to co-sleep.

The modern wahakura is a re-creation of the porakaraka or purunga pou. The natural fibre and the ‘Maori’ look have a special appeal and, in some areas, midwives encourage mothers to learn to make their own. It is an easily transportable item capable of being taken wherever baby goes and thus provides a consistent safer sleeping environment. It creates for the family a ‘special sleeping space’ for baby that should be free of pillows, loose blankets and toys and where tobacco smoke is prohibited, little sisters and brothers recognise a boundary and intoxicated people are unwelcome. Because it is able to be placed in the bed, a safe co-sleeping arrangement is possible for those who want baby close at night and the proximity makes breastfeeding easier.

The wahakura comes with simple rules to maximise the safety of the sleeping environment.

The wahakura rules:
• Smoke-free environment;
• Face up, face clear;
• Flat surface, no pillows, no loose blankets, no toys;
• Put baby back into the wahakura after feeding;
• No intoxicated adults;
• Take the wahakura everywhere for every sleep.

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