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News

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*****Grief counseling, information offered by Sudden Infant Death Syndrome project team

DALLAS--Parents who lose their babies to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), or "crib death," often face a grief intensified by guilt. Many believe the death could have been prevented.

SIDS, a major cause of death of infants between one and nine months of age, kills an estimated 10,000 infants in the U.S. each year. Its cause or causes are not understood by medical scientists. SIDS victims are apparently healthy infants who die suddenly. Often the lack of a clear understanding of the disorder complicates the parents' loss.

"We can't tell parents why their baby died," says Leslie Malone, coordinator of the SIDS Information and Counseling Project for the North Texas Area. Privately funded, the project is under the auspices of The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas.

"We only know it's SIDS because an autopsy doesn't reveal a cause of death," she says.

Director of the SIDS project is Dr. Arthur Weinberg, professor of Pathology at UTHSCD. He says, "If we cannot yet prevent SIDS, we can help the families cope with its impact."

Sometimes called the "if only" syndrome, parents agonize over what they should have done. "If only I hadn't slept so soundly." "If only I hadn't covered my baby with a blanket when I put her to bed."

Then relatives and friends all have theories on why the child died -- the windows were open, the bottles weren't sterilized, the baby wasn't breast fed.

Parents often blame themselves and each other. Marriages can become strained or broken.

Grief counseling is offered parents during their immediate crisis. When speaking recently with a grief-torn mother, Malone was told the baby was discovered dead under its covers. The mother blamed herself. "Have you ever snuggled under the covers on a cold night?" Malone asked the woman. "And did you suffocate? Well, babies don't either." Scientific studies have confirmed this fact.

Besides offering individual counseling, the SIDS project provides names of SIDS support groups.

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SIDS add one

Also, the project works to educate law enforcement and paramedic groups on SIDS identification. Police officials unfamiliar with SIDS have been known to arrest parents for child abuse. SIDS babies are often found in their cribs lying face down. Since blood pools by gravity, the infants may develop red blotches over the underside of their bodies, misinterpretable as marks from beatings.

Justices of the peace are also provided information from the SIDS project. Texas is the only state in the country where rural counties, without medical examiners to perform autopsies, operate under a justice of the peace system. A JP, usually without medical expertise, determines the cause of death and signs the death certificate when anyone dies in the home or without an attending physician. All 39 counties serviced by the SIDS project are under the JP system, with the exception of Dallas county.

In some cases the JP does not order an autopsy, the only way of determining a SIDS death, says Weinberg. And if the child has had evidence of a cold, which is sometimes the case, the JP's diagnosis may be "pneumonia."

"We try to educate the JP on what SIDS is and show them the necessity of ordering an autopsy. Except for a few pathological changes, the autopsy will not show why the infant died. But an autopsy can tell that it wasn't anything besides SIDS," says Weinberg.

The SIDS project receives many calls from parents concerned that their child might be prone to SIDS because of past episodes in which the infant seemed to stop breathing (apnea spells). There are many causes for such spells, he says, and these patients should be evaluated by a pediatrician. The project refers some of these patients to the pulmonary department of Children's Medical Center, under the direction of Dr. Richard Silver. Here they can be studied and, if required, appropriate therapy given.

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NOTE: To contact the UTHSCD SIDS project, located in the Institute of Forensic Sciences, call 688-2796.

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