

Public Health Nurse and Coroner Teaming

by Penny Stastny, PHN

As the Public Health Nurse (PHN) in Orange County, I have found that the home visit to the SIDS parents can be more effective if I talk to the coroner or coroner's investigator prior to the visit. In addition to gathering important information about the family and the death of the baby, there are numerous other benefits to this interaction. For example, it provides an opportunity for me to get to know the coroner's investigator. It also allows us to develop an understanding of each other's role, and share resources and information and to work as a team. I have found that this has helped the coroner's investigators develop a better understanding of the nature of the home visit, its powerful value and the role of the PHN. This has created a more effective team approach that has benefited the coroner's investigator, the PHN and SIDS families.

Here are some samples of the type of questions I ask my contact at the coroner's office prior to a home visit:

- What were the circumstances surrounding the death?
- Was the death pronounced at the hospital or home?
- What is the family structure? Are there two parents, single mother, boyfriend, day care provider, etc.?
- Is there a support system? (family, friends, etc.)
- Are there other children? How were the parent(s) coping when you left?
- Did the death occur in a day care setting? (If so, ask for the address, phone number, and if the caretaker is aware of the possible SIDS diagnosis.)
- What information is available on the family - i.e. prenatal history, baby's birth date, etc.?
- Was the baby sick or on medication?
- Was the baby's pediatrician informed yet? Do you know the pediatrician's name and phone number?
- What is the obstetrician's name and number?
- Was the child abuse registry checked? (routine procedure in many counties)
- What language is spoken by the parent(s)?
- What information was given to the parent(s)?
- Did you inform the parent(s) that the County PHN would call and visit the home?
- Were there any unusual circumstances?
- Was an autopsy performed? What kind? What are the results?
- Was SIDS as a possible cause of death discussed?
- What, if any, educational materials were given to the parent(s)?

I have found that obtaining the answers to these questions prior to the home visit has helped me to be more effective in my support of the SIDS families and to better address their individual needs. It also helps the parents by reducing their burden of repeatedly answering the same questions and describing the details of the SIDS incident over and over again. In addition, it has left me with more time for answering the parents' questions and helping the parents, siblings and other members of the family through the grieving process.

I make it a habit to call the coroner's office back to thank them for their support and assistance and to exchange information and share findings. It also provides an opportunity to: discuss any needed changes in the approach and assessment of families, share materials and resources, and clarify SIDS information. This ongoing contact has improved communications between the coroner's office and our County Health Care Agency. As a team, we are more effective in helping SIDS families recover from their grief and cope with the loss of their infant.



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