

New guidelines for the investigation of sudden unexpected death in infancy launched

November 30 2016

National guidance for professionals handling cases of sudden unexpected child death which draws upon University of Warwick expertise are published today (30 November 2016).

The guidelines, Sudden unexpected death in infancy and childhood, have been published by The Royal College of Pathologists (RCPATH) and The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health and draws on research by Dr Peter Sidebotham and Dr Joanna Garstang from the University's Warwick Medical School.

The guidelines aim to be sensitive to the needs of grief-stricken parents while also enabling an explanation to be found and make recommendations to each profession and outline best practice for each part of the investigation process.

Dr Peter Sidebotham, Associate Professor of Child Health, at Warwick Medical School said:

"In my work with bereaved families, I have come across terrible situations where parents have been kept in the dark or made to feel like criminals. I have also experienced some great examples of how families have been supported through the days and weeks following their child's death and how police and health professionals have worked together in a sensitive, thorough, and caring manner. Parents often tell me that what they want, above anything else, is to understand why their baby died, but also their hopes that by investigating their child's death thoroughly, we

can work to prevent other families having to go through a similar experience."

The new guidance aims to help to help agencies work together to share information and keep families included at every stage. The original guidelines published in 2004 followed high profile cases of miscarriages of justice involving the prosecution of mothers for causing the deaths of their babies. These events raised serious concerns about the role of the expert witness in court, issues about standards of proof, the quality of evidence and about the procedures adopted for the investigation of sudden unexpected deaths of infants.

This 2016 edition of the guidelines have been extensively reviewed and updated by an expert working group from the healthcare, charity and justice sectors and cover multi-agency planning, supporting families, assessment of the environment and circumstances of the death, case discussion, the post-mortem and the inquest and role of the coroner. They are based on the best current international research.

Francine Bates, Chief Executive, The Lullaby Trust said:

"We can never take away the tragedy of losing a baby suddenly and unexpectedly but we can ensure that families get the support they need during this terrible time in their lives. Every death must be properly investigated and parents are the first to ask why their baby died. Many professionals from different agencies become involved when an apparently healthy baby dies. It is therefore crucial that we have sensitive guidelines in place setting out how we can all work together while at the same time caring for the bereaved family."

Baroness Helena Kennedy QC and Chair of the Working Group said:

"It is important to remember that, in the majority of cases where a child

dies unexpectedly and suddenly, nothing untoward has taken place. It is only in a small number of cases where something unlawful has occurred. Professionals investigating the sudden and unexpected death of a child have to strike a balance between maintaining justice for parents while ensuring the protection of the youngest amongst us who have no voice. This report takes a fresh look at how agencies can investigate unexpected deaths in infants with thoroughness, care, compassion and to the highest possible standards."

The working group also recognises that further work is needed in the area of investigating sudden [death](#) in infancy and childhood and hope that this document will stimulate discussion and further research.

Provided by University of Warwick

Citation: New guidelines for the investigation of sudden unexpected death in infancy launched (2016, November 30) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-11-guidelines-sudden-unexpected-death-infancy.html>

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