

Study: Infant deaths are avoidable

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

Almost two dozen infants have died in Oakland County over the last four years with their parents or loved ones close by.

Without intention, the infants may have been put in harm's way, but parental negligence was a major contributor in many cases, according to the Oakland County Medical Examiner who said the deaths were preventable.

Social standing, economic status and intelligence levels were not significant considerations in the deaths, said the medical examiner. Although most occurred in Pontiac, the preventable infant deaths also occurred in Auburn Hills, Farmington Hills, Rochester, Southfield and Wixom.

"This is a public health problem that needs attention, said Dr. Lubina J. Dragovic, forensic pathologist and county medical examiner. "Most of these deaths were unnecessary."

The deaths usually occurred at home in the parent's bed, on the couch or on the floor. One occurred last month at Southfield's Providence Hospital in a special unit designed to enrich the birthing experience.

The infant deaths are attributable, according to Dragovic, to a general diagnosis of "positional asphyxia." Babies die because something — a pillow, bedding or stuffed toy — obstructs the breathing passages and the infant asphyxiates, the medical examiner explained.

In some cases of positional asphyxia, the baby dies because a parent or caregiver physically rolls on top of the infant, said Dragovic, a resident of Grosse Pointe Farms. They are classified as "overlays," he said, meaning the baby died because mother or person's body overlaid the infant's.

Dragovic, who has long suspected that some positional asphyxia deaths are too frequently misdiagnosed as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), decided to look into the situation locally after attending a meeting of the American Association of Forensic Scientists last year in San Antonio.

At that meeting, it was reported that Cook County, Illinois (Chicago area) experienced 12 overlay deaths in a 5-year period. "I decided to look at Oakland County and southeast Michigan," said Dragovic, who authorized a review of infant asphyxia

deaths. The results were compelling, according to Dr. Mark A. Fischione who compiled the data on the basis of information provided by Dragovic and fellow deputy forensic pathologist Kanubhai Virani. Fischione lives in St. Clair Shores and Virani is a resident of West Bloomfield.

In slightly more than four years, Oakland County's medical examiner's office handled 22 infant deaths that Fischione classifies as asphyxia, including positional asphyxia and overlay deaths. During the same time frame, 12 similar deaths occurred in counties that confer with Oakland's medical examiners — Saginaw, 3; Monroe, 3; Jackson, 4; Livingston, 1; and Sanilac, 1.

The deaths recorded in Oakland County, by community, were: Pontiac, 9; Detroit, 3 (brought to Oakland officials by hospitals such as Botsford and Providence) and one each in 10 communities such as Auburn Hills, Royal Oak, Wixom, Redford Township in Wayne County and Shelby Township in Macomb County.

All the deaths were tragic, said Dragovic, but he added that many were undoubtedly preventable.

ventable, although the exact number could not be determined. The results of the study will be presented in August at the National Academy of Medical Examiners in Traverse City, said Fischione. The goal is to alert the medical community and the general public at large.

"Some of these deaths were preventable," said Dragovic. "It's a public health problem we've got to address."

Infant death number one in Oakland County, according to Fischione, occurred in February 1992, when a Pontiac mother and her 7-month-old child were sleeping on a sofa.

In May 1993, a 7-week-old girl died in Rochester after she and her mother, an admittedly heavy sleeper, slept in the same bed, said the deputy medical examiner.

In September 1994, a 3-month-old boy died in Oakland Township when his head became entangled in a blanket, said Fischione. The cause was listed as asphyxia due to oxygen deprivation caused by the blanket, he said.

In July 1995, a 2-month-old boy died while sleeping with his mother in bed, said Fischione.

The last infant death included

in the study occurred less than a month ago, April 29th, in Redford Township when a 1-month-old girl died while sleeping with her mother, said Fischione. While the case is still open, the tentative cause of death, according to Fischione, is asphyxia due to covering, he said.

In some cases, other factors were likely involved, the medical examiner said. If a parent or caregiver is extremely tired — or has been drinking alcohol — or she might sleep more soundly and be less likely to notice contact with something as small as an infant.

Dragovic and his colleagues do not suggest that parents never sleep with their babies. "But we want them to be aware of the dangers," he said. "If they think that's a good way to bond with the baby, they should take precautions."

Calling attention to these deaths — and the conclusion they were avoidable — will likely cause discomfort for parents, said Dragovic. The diagnosis of SIDS implies that the deaths could not have been prevented, and thus more readily accepted. But a diagnosis of positional asphyxia attributes some blame to parents or caregivers who

may have left the infant in an unsafe place or, at a minimum, neglected to monitor the baby. Dragovic doesn't doubt the existence of SIDS, currently believed to be the second leading cause of infant deaths — about 6,000 annually, according to some estimates. But he's convinced positional asphyxia deaths are sometimes attributed to SIDS for a number of reasons, including the fact that untrained medical examiners don't have the wherewithal to delve into a baby's death.

"SIDS is a diagnosis of exclusion," said deputy medical examiner Virani, "made after every other possible cause is ruled out."

Dragovic is less clinical in his assessment. SIDS is too often a "wastebasket term," he said, "for any infant death that you don't have an answer for."

He and his colleagues intend to call attention to positional asphyxia deaths even though it will likely accelerate debate among forensic pathologists and medical examiners.

The findings may also stir feelings of guilt among parents who Dragovic said would much rather live with a more sympathetic ruling, like SIDS.

Board continues kindergarten choice

BY TIM SMITH
STAFF WRITER

It is still not popular with all parents, but the controversial all-day, every-other-day kindergarten program in the Walled Lake Consolidated School District lives for another year.

Following weeks of survey scrutiny and numerous phone calls to school district officials about the merits of the first-year program, school board members Thursday night unanimously decided it was worth continuing — albeit with some provisos.

The number one condition is that a "school of choice" for kindergartners again be set up, to give parents an option whether to enroll their youngsters in traditional half-day or full-day programs. But it has to be decided where the half-day classes will be located, something Superintendent James Geisler said would be dealt with in the next three weeks.

It was also part of the board motion that the amount spent on schools of choice not exceed that spent this year for two half-day sections, accommodating 100

WALLED LAKE

students, housed at Meadow Lake and Dublin elementary.

"That would be enough for two sections," Geisler said during the meeting. "They would be at a central or regional location. . . It moves us forward, but it moves us forward halfway, in a more cautious way."

Also part of the motion is to collect and study data about how well the program is working, as well as studies of other districts

using the concept, with another recommendation to be made in February 1997. This year's 1,000 kindergartners enrolled in all-day, every-other-day also would be monitored to see how well they adapt to first grade.

Before the board took action, it heard comments from both sides of the issue. First, several kindergarten teachers and parents from the advisory committee gave positive testimonials about the program's worth.

"The first couple weeks (of the school year) the days are long," said Dublin parent Deborah

Bankes. "But what's going to happen to them in the first grade if they're not used to it?"

"This all-day, alternate-day program gives them the chance to experience what a long day is like. If it's too much for them, they have the next day to recover."

Bankes also said criticism that children forget what they learn because they stay home every other day is "a moot point. You don't forget a topic the next day if you spend more time on it" in the class, which proponents of the program suggest occurs.

One of the kindergarten teachers said she would "never, ever recommend anything to parents or the board that I thought would hurt children in any way."

She pointed out that having two kindergarten options was divisive among teachers and parents. "Continuity in a building is important for children to see."

Among parents urging the half-day choice to continue were Lori and Jeff Ellis, who live in the Meadow Lake Elementary attendance area, located in Farmington Hills. They both urged the board to bring half-day kindergartners back to Meadow Lake in 1996-97.

"Students at Meadow Lake have extenuating circumstances," Lori Ellis said, referring to last year's redistricting and subsequent move of Maple Elementary students to Meadow Lake, leased out of the Birmingham district.

CITY OF FARMINGTON HILLS SPECIAL GENERAL ELECTION NOTICE 15TH STATE SENATE DISTRICT (TO FILL A VACANCY)

PUBLIC ACCURACY TEST

TO THE QUALIFIED ELECTORS OF THE CITY OF FARMINGTON HILLS, OAKLAND COUNTY, MICHIGAN:

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that the Public Accuracy Test for the June 4, 1996, SPECIAL GENERAL ELECTION, has been scheduled for Thursday, May 30, 1996, at 2:00 p.m., at the City Clerk's Office, 31555 Eleven Mile Road, Farmington Hills, Michigan.

The Public Accuracy Test is conducted to determine that the program and the computer being used to tabulate the results of the election counts the votes in the manner prescribed by the law.

KATHRYN A. DORNAN
City Clerk

Published May 23, 1996

CITY OF FARMINGTON HILLS SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS CITY COUNCIL PUBLIC HEARING MEETING MAY 20, 1996

The meeting was called to order by Mayor Vagnozzi at 7:30 p.m. Members Present: Barnett, Bates, Grant, Korteja, Oliverio, Sever, and Vagnozzi. Members Absent: None. Others Present: Assistant City Managers Brock and Call, Deputy City Clerk Rose-Haiz, Directors Blasell and Lasley, and Attorney Donahue.

COUNCIL PROCLAIMED:

- May 23, 1996 as James Allen Lanigan Day in recognition of his dedicated service to the children of Farmington Hills.
- May 23, 24, 25, 1996 as Poppy Days.
- May 18-27, 1996 as Michigan Weeks in Farmington Hills.

COUNCIL TOOK THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS:

- Received presentation by Miss Farmington Audrey Chernauckas.
- Determined to proceed with special assessment district for road rehabilitation for Meadowbrook Hills Subdivision.
- Determined NOT to enact Ordinance C-9-96 requiring under age persons to wear safety helmet while riding a bicycle.
- Denied rezoning request 1-1-96 for southeast corner of Scotten and Middlebelt Roads.
- Deferred consideration of rezoning request on 30420 W. Twelve Mile until June 10, 1996.
- Set Study Session meeting for June 3, 1996.

COUNCIL ENACTED ORDINANCE AMENDMENTS RELATIVE TO:

- Rezoning property west of Halsted, north of Eleven Mile, from IRO, Industrial Research Office District and RC-1, Multiple-Family District to RC-2, Multiple-Family District.
- Amending Article V, Chapter 33, Water and Sewer for Cross Connection Control and Service Connections.

APPROVED:

- New class C liquor license for KHWIP, Inc./Banquet and Catering Hall located at 23666 Orchard Lake Road (Elk's Lodge site).
- Public hearing date of June 17, 1996 for vacation of Lipton Street.
- Employment in accordance with Section 10.01A of the City Code.
- Special event permit for Recreation Division annual bike tour for children ages 8-13 on June 1, 1996.
- Special event permit for St. Vincent & Sarah Fisher Center annual Garden Party Food and Wine Tasting fund raiser on June 2, 1996.

AWARDED BIDS/PURCHASE ORDERS FOR:

- Kitchen equipment for Activities Center to The Boelter Company in the amount of \$22,000.00.
- Canopies for Department of Special Services to Anchor Industries in the amount of \$3,782.20.
- Landscape trailer for Parks Division to Ajax Trailers in the amount of \$6,447.00.
- Street sweeping services to G & M Enterprises, Ltd., in the amount of \$54,600.00.
- Green Valley Subdivision pond dredging to B & V Construction, Inc., in the amount of \$15,044.00.

Published May 23, 1996

MAYOR ALDO VAGNOZZI
KATHRYN A. DORNAN, City Clerk

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