Infant deaths spark debate

The Oakland County Medical Examinor — and his view that some infant fatalities are attributable to positional asphyxiation, rather than crib death — is the focal point of a growing controversy.

At issue is the practice of the redical examiner's office to classify some infant fatalities as positional asphyxiation deaths, rather than attributing them to SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syn-drome), often called crib deaths.

drome, otten called erio deaths.

The difference, according to a lawmaker who is challenging the medical examiner, can be devastating. Parents who have just lost a child do not need a ruling that incorrectly implies they may have been negligent, said State Rep. Penny Crissman.

The Rochester Republican earlier this year introduced legislation that would enable the parents or guardians of an infant who dies unexpectedly to appeal the ruling on the cause of death as determined by the medical examiner.

Crissman met Friday with representatives of the Michigan Department of Community Health and the Michigan Medical Examiner's Association to discuss House Bill 5540 which she introduced in February and hopes to promote before she leaves the legislature at the end

At the conclusion of the meeting, Crissman said she will make some changes in the proposed legislation. "But I'm going to move it along," she said, "because the legislation is needed,"

cd. Crissman said she will rewrite the proposed legislation creating a panel — possibly three to five experts — to review, on request, the findings of a medical examiner. Her initial legislation called for appeals to be handled by the Child Death Review Team from another county, but after Friday's meeting she decided that would not be the appropriate agency. agency.

agency.

Crissman admits the legislation is aimed, at least indirectly, at Oakland County Medical Examiner Ljubisa Dragovic. "He is a physician for whom I have respect," he said. "But anybody can be wrong, and there should be a way to challenge his findings."

Dragovic said he was aware of Crissman's legislation. But he doesn't back down.

He said some of his colleagues in the medical profession too fre-quently — and incorrectly — attributed infant deaths to SIDS because investigators, including some physicians, aren't thorough

enough. SIDS is a "garbage" diagnosis, he said, used as a catchall.

Adding to the problem, he said, is the reluctance on the part of the medical community to be brutally frank — even if with grief-stricken parents. "The most bitter truth is preferable to the sweetest non-truth," he said.

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With that position in mind, said Dragovic, pathologists in his office carefully evaluate infant deaths using the results from autopsies as well as investigations from the scene. When his office determines the cause of death as positional asphynation, said the medical examiner, it's because the ovidence leads to that conclusion.

Dragovic said he is not asset to that conclusion.

Dragovic said he is not sur-prised that Oakland County has more infant deaths attributed to positional asphyxiation — and fewer listed as SIDS fatalities— than any other county in Michi-gan.

If somebody wants to chal-lenge those conclusions, he said, they're welcome to do so, provid-ing they have adequate training and expertise. But when it comes to second guessing a pathologist, just any physician won't do.

Having a physician who is not The

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highly trained in pathology review the findings of a medical examiner would be akin to "tak-ing your (pregnant) wife to a der-matologist for a second opinion," Dragovic said.

One of those who agrees on the need for a method of appeal-ing a medical examiner's ind-ings is Dr. Joel Hans, a Bloom-field Township resident who is chief of pathology and laboratory medicine at Children's Hospital of Michigan, He's also associated with the Michigan SIDS Alliance.

"I respect Dr. Dragovic as a professional," he said. "But there's room for professionals to disagree."

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Detroit Edison maintains a 10-foot clearance between tree

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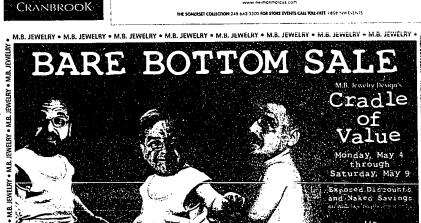
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