Study looks at mother-infant bed sharing

BY FRANK NOLAN
Research Promotion

A study led by Christine Ateah, Nursing, has found that many new mothers either regularly or occasionally sleep in the same bed as their infants, even though they acknowledge that bed sharing is potentially risky.

“It has become increasingly accepted in the medical community that caregiver and infant bed sharing has risks,” Ateah said. “The Canadian Paediatric Society recommends that an infant should sleep in a separate bed for the first year of life, and the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority has a policy that it will in the hospital, newborns cannot bed share with their mothers.”

When infants and parents share the same bed, Ateah said, the parent could roll onto the baby while sleeping or the infant’s head could be wedged between surfaces, putting the child at risk of asphyxiation. The same risk applies when parents fall asleep on the couch with their infants, where there is a chance that the baby could slip between the parent and the back of the couch. Previous research has found that risks for the infant during bed sharing are highest when the caregiver is a smoker, extremely fatigued, under the effects of alcohol or drugs, or uses heavy covers and/or pillows for sleeping.

In 2005, Ateah and co-investigator Kathy Hamelin, a clinical nurse specialist with the Health Sciences Centre, received funding from the Manitoba Institute of Child Health to conduct the study. They contacted the mothers of all of the children born in Winnipeg during a one-month period that year, and asked them to complete a questionnaire.

“We contacted about 1,100 mothers, and our return rate was about 26 per cent,” Ateah said. “We asked them a number of questions, including whether they shared a bed with their infant on either a regular or occasional basis, and if they had ever had an experience of waking up after rolling onto the baby.”

The study found that about 89 per cent of the mothers agreed that there were risks associated with bed sharing. In spite of this, 72 per cent of the mothers reported sleeping in the same bed as their infant on either an occasional or regular basis.

“We also had about 15 per cent who said they did have an experience where they had rolled onto or partly onto their infant, and had been woken up by their infant,” Ateah said. “Some of the responses indicated that the mothers thought bed sharing would lower the risk for sudden infant death syndrome, and others said they did it because it made night feeding easier.”

Ateah said the study points to a need for more public education on the subject, including public health announcements and discussions in prenatal classes.

“Right now, people are going to six weeks of prenatal classes that are primarily aimed at preparing them for the experiences of pregnancy, labour and delivery,” she said. “I’m currently preparing a pilot study on adding an additional pre-natal class that would focus on caring for a young infant, including information about the risks of bed sharing. Our recommendation is that mothers need more education, because if we have so many who acknowledge that there are risks, but the practice still continues, it suggests that simply telling them it’s risky isn’t enough.”

Ateah and co-investigator Christine Ateah, Nursing, studied attitudes and practices associated with caregiver and infant bed sharing.