

Research News

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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 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



Photo by Frank Nolan

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

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."

Focusing on language and memory

BY FRANK NOLAN
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At this very moment, you're using two important cognitive abilities. Your memory is allowing you to recognize the words on this page, and language processes are giving them meaning. If either of these were absent, you would never have gotten to the end of this paragraph.

Language and memory are the subjects of a major, international conference being held at the University of Manitoba this month. From April 12 to 14, the department of psychology will present *The (Grand) SLAMM: Symposium on Language and Memory at Manitoba*. Organized by psychology faculty members Murray Singer and Jason Leboe, the symposium will include presentations by leading experts from Canada, the United States and Australia.

Presenters at the SLAMM conference will be approaching memory and language from a number of different angles, and discussing the ways in which these two themes in cognitive science overlap. Singer said the two fields are very closely related, and over the last 15 years or so, basic principles of memory study have become an increasingly important part of research into language processes.

"If we understand language, but have no way to retrieve it, then it

would be next to useless for us," Singer said. "For example, how do the squiggles on a page end up as meaningful ideas you can store away in your mind? This is where the study of language processes intersects with the very large field of the fundamental processes of memory."

"It also works the other way," Leboe said. "So much of what would be more traditionally thought of as a memory task also relies on language. Some people have said that remembering events from your life is, in some ways, analogous to story-telling. They believe that when you recall something, you construct a narrative in the moment, which is a very verbal exercise."

This idea that we don't have direct access to a previous experience, and that we use language to construct stories, is only one of the themes SLAMM presenters will be exploring. Another involves "heuristics," or the processes involved in deciding whether or not a specific memory was the one we were looking for.

"You can think of it as that sense you get that you've found the right representation of what you're trying to remember," Leboe said. "Some details will be true to the event you want to remember, but then others will often be made up on the fly so that it makes sense to you at this moment. It's about how you judge whether something



Photo by Frank Nolan

Conference organizers Murray Singer (left) and Jason Leboe, Psychology.

in your mind is true to a previous experience, or if it is something you inferred from that experience."

Other topics that will be covered at the symposium include high-dimensional memory and language models, how we construct meaning in language, the influence of memory on how we process text, and different explorations of recognition memory.

"This symposium will cover some of the most exciting research in this area," Singer said. "Anyone interested in how we understand spoken and written

messages, or the mechanisms involved in remembering, is certain to find these presentations stimulating and thought-provoking."

Registration for *The (Grand) SLAMM: Symposium on Language and Memory at Manitoba* is free for University of Manitoba staff and students. For more information, please visit the conference Website: www.umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/psychology/language_memory_conference

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