



The Lullaby Trust

Guidance for media reporting on sudden infant deaths



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Thank you for taking the time to read our guidance for media reporting on sudden infant deaths.

The Lullaby Trust receives regular enquires from journalists writing about sudden infant deaths and these guidelines aim to provide the information you need.

We work hard to improve public awareness of sudden infant death and we are always available to support journalists who are reporting on this issue.

The sudden death of any baby is a tragic and rare event which naturally attracts media coverage. But when covering these harrowing events, it is important for journalists to be mindful of the need for accuracy and the impact reporting has on bereaved families.

I hope that you find the following advice useful.

Jenny Ward
Chief Executive
The Lullaby Trust



WHY READ THESE GUIDELINES?

Sudden unexpected deaths in infancy (SUDI) are thankfully rare in the United Kingdom. So when a baby dies suddenly and unexpectedly, there is often local media attention directed towards the bereaved family.

When done well, news stories about families who have lost their baby can be a tool for raising awareness of sudden infant death and the safer sleep practices that can help reduce the risk. A responsible, sensitive news story can also help a family to feel supported by the wider community.

However, sensationalist and misinformed reporting of a sudden infant death can cause a tremendous amount of additional grief for families during this difficult time.

These guidelines can assist the media to report a sudden infant death in a sensitive and accurate manner. The Lullaby Trust consulted with several bereaved families who have been contacted by the media in the past to help inform this advice.

If you have any further questions about the following guide or need advice, please contact The Lullaby Trust Communications team on 020 7802 3202 or email communications@lullabytrust.org.uk.

“ ”

As a parent and an MP whose own bereavement was covered by the UK media, I know all too well the impact the media can have on a family who have lost their baby to sudden infant death. I am proud to see The Lullaby Trust has produced guidance to help journalists tackle this difficult subject and I hope it will lead to a positive change in the way the media reports on infant deaths.

Antoinette Sandbach, MP

“ ”

Reading stories about other sudden infant deaths reminds me that I am not alone in this experience

bereaved parent

“ ”

I was really disappointed that the journalist twisted my words, using expressions that I would never have used.

bereaved parent

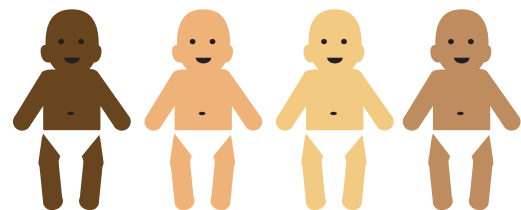
DEFINITION OF SUDI AND SIDS

A sudden unexpected death in infancy (SUDI) is the sudden death of a baby where there is no known pre-existing condition. In the UK, some 500 babies die suddenly and unexpectedly each year. Most of these deaths can be explained, however 240 remain unexplained and are classed as sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).

We do not know what causes SIDS and for many babies it is likely that a combination of factors affect them at a vulnerable stage of their development, which leads them to die suddenly and unexpectedly. For example, babies who are born premature and of low birth weight are particularly vulnerable to SIDS. However, we do know that the chance of SIDS occurring can be significantly reduced by following safer sleep advice.

240

SIDS claims the lives of approximately 240 babies every year in the UK: that's around 5 babies a week



SAFER SLEEP ADVICE:

- Sleep your baby on their back for all sleeps - day and night.
- Sleep your baby on a firm, flat, waterproof mattress that it is in good condition.
- Sleep your baby in a clear cot or Moses basket that is free from pillows, cot bumpers, soft toys and loose bedding.
- Share a room with your baby for the first six months.
- Keep your baby smoke-free during pregnancy and after birth.
- Never sleep on a sofa or armchair with your baby as this can increase the risk of SIDS by 50 times.
- Do not co-sleep with your baby if you or your partner have been drinking, smoking, taken drugs or are extremely tired.

WHEN A BABY DIES SUDDENLY AND UNEXPECTEDLY

The death of a baby is devastating for families and their close friends. A lack of understanding around the processes that follow the death of a baby can often lead the media to publish sensationalist articles or focus on one part of the process, leading readers to believe the parents may be at fault. The below will help to give an understanding of what happens in the majority of cases:

- It is a requirement in England, Wales and Northern Ireland that all sudden and unexpected infant deaths be reported to the Coroner and to the police. The police unit that investigates a sudden infant death differs from region to region. In some areas it is the Child Abuse Investigation Team (CAIT) that investigates sudden infant deaths. This is standard procedure and does not suggest any wrong doing.
- A post mortem examination will be called for by the Coroner. The post mortem examination will be carried out by a pathologist with the aim to identify an explanation for the baby's death. Once completed, the pathologist gives an initial report to the Coroner. The final report may take several months to complete depending on the number and type of tests conducted.
- An inquest may be held if the cause of death remains uncertain. During an inquest, parents might be called as witnesses. The inquest does not involve accusations or assigning blame, its purpose is to find out who died, how and when.
- If the post mortem examination cannot find a cause of death, it will be classed as SIDS. The coroner may also classify the death as 'unascertained'.
- In England, a review will be held by the Child Death Overview Panel on behalf of the Local Safeguarding Children Board, convened by the local authority. The Panel's main purpose is to learn how to try and prevent future deaths and make recommendations on the lessons learned from each case to the Local Safeguarding Children Board.

TOP 5 REPORTING TIPS

- 1. Avoid sensationalising the police visit.**
It is standard procedure for the police to attend the family home, and does not suggest any wrongdoing by the family.
- 2. Don't speculate on the cause of the baby's death.** It can take some time for a Coroner to identify the cause of death, and speculation in the media can cause the family further grief or give them false hope that the death will be explained.
- 3. Allow the family time to grieve.**
Sometimes the death of a baby is reported shortly after the infant has died. Give the family space and time to grieve before contacting them.
- 4. Be relevant.** When a baby has died suddenly and unexpectedly, only write about the parents' age, race, colour, legal status, marital status or employment status if it's relevant.
- 5. Reference the evidence-based safer sleep advice that can help to reduce the risk of SIDS occurring.**

I feel that some publications like to sensationalise infant deaths. As if the event wasn't dramatic enough! I feel these publications could do more to highlight the risks and the research around SIDS too.

bereaved parent

Be careful with how you phrase your questions. Instead of asking 'What happened when your baby died' ask me 'What happened to your baby'.

bereaved parent

THE EDITORS' CODE OF PRACTICE

The Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) is the independent regulator for the newspaper and magazine industry in the UK. The Editors' Code of Practice, the standards that IPSO upholds, sets the highest professional standards for journalists.

There are several Clauses of the Code particularly relevant to reporting about sudden infant deaths. These are Clause 1 (Accuracy), Clause 2 (Privacy), Clause 4 (Intrusion into grief or shock) and Clause 12 (Discrimination). The Editors' Code of Practice is available on IPSO's website.

Clause 4 of the Editors' Code says that:

'In cases involving personal grief or shock, enquiries and approaches must be made with sympathy and discretion and publication handled sensitively. These provisions should not restrict the right to report legal proceedings.'

Journalists must make decisions about how to approach a family bereaved by a sudden infant death or write a story about the topic with sympathy and sensitivity. IPSO has produced guidance to help journalists to report on a death with sensitivity. The guidance may be helpful to journalists reporting on these stories and is available on IPSO's website.

IPSO offers advice to journalists who want to make sure that they comply with the Code, including when reporting on sudden infant deaths. Members of the public who are concerned about coverage in a newspaper or magazine can also contact IPSO for advice.

For more information
contact IPSO at
www.ipso.co.uk
inquiries@ipso.co.uk
0300 123 22 20

WORKING WITH CASE STUDIES

This may be the family's first experience dealing with the media and it can be a daunting prospect for some. Ensure that you handle the interview sensitively and follow the below tips:

- Explain to the parents how their story is likely to be used. For example, if it will be for a news article or a feature and whether it will be published online or in print.
- Keep the family updated on the progress of the story. Let them know when it is going to be published or if it has been dropped.
- Refer to the baby by his or her name during the interview.
- Give advance warning on what questions are going to be asked and allow the parents the opportunity to say what particular questions or details they are not comfortable discussing.

Use my baby's name. Some journalists skirt around the name because they feel uncomfortable

bereaved parent

- Be patient and allow time for pauses during the interview in case the parents get upset and would like a break.
- Ask permission to use any photos taken from social media or ask the family to provide a photo.
- The contact information of families should not be shared with third parties without their express permission.

NEED A CASE STUDY?

Are you writing a story about sudden infant death and want to interview a family who have lost their baby? The Lullaby Trust has a bank of case studies located throughout the UK who are prepared to share their experiences with the media. Contact the communications team for more information on 020 7802 3202 or email communications@lullabytrust.org.uk.

HOW WE CAN HELP YOU

If you are writing an article about SIDS or a sudden unexpected death in infancy, we can offer you support by:

- Putting you in touch with a case study who is happy to share their personal story of losing a child
- Providing expert quotes on the causes of SIDS and the evidence-based safer sleep practices that reduce the risk
- Signposting to other relevant baby loss charities or organisations
- Providing online information with the latest UK SIDS facts and figures.

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