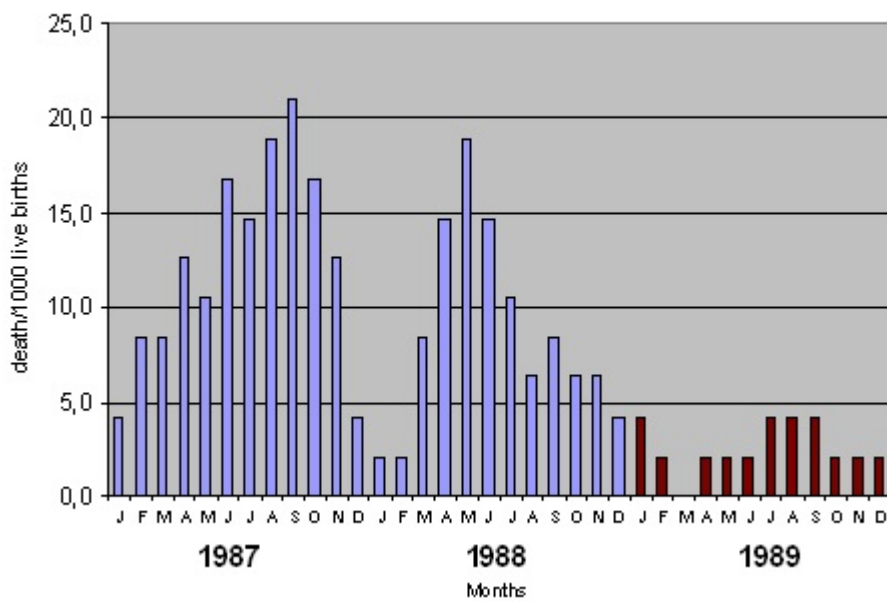


SIDS Cases in Southland Health District (NZ) 1987-1989



Death/1000 before and after recommendation to 1) wash nappies, clothes, bedding etc. in soap and water, 2) sterilize feeder bottles and teats in boiling water.

Marked drop in cot deaths

The cot death rate in Southland has dropped from an average of 8.5 per 1000 live births in the three years up to 1988 to 2.8 per 1000 in 1989. This represents a reduction from the highest cot death rate in the country to one of the lowest. The drop followed publication of the results of research carried out by Dr Jim Spratt into a possible connection between cot death and chemicals used in baby care.

Dr Spratt is convinced his recommendations on the washing of baby clothing and bedding and the sterilizing of bottles and teats have had an effect.

Medical researchers have said previously large swings in post-neonatal death rate have occurred in Southland since 1963 and observation of the rate over at least three years is necessary before anything could be said about definite change in the rate of cot death.

The major marketers of infant hygiene products in New Zealand have also disputed Dr Spratt's theory, saying there is no relationship between the use of their products and cot death incidence in New Zealand or around the world.

Dr Spratt published his findings from a questionnaire to Southland parents who had suffered a cot death in December, 1988, and at that stage recommended to return to "old-fashioned" methods of washing nappies, clothing and bedding in soap and water and sterilizing bottles and teats by boiling.

Following publication of this recommendation, there was an immediate reduction in cot deaths in Southland.

Figures confirmed by the Southland Area Health Board indicate there were five cot deaths in

Southland during 1989 compared with 13 in 1988 and 23 in 1987.

On receipt of the confirmed figures Dr Spratt prepared the graph above showing the three-month moving average deaths in Southland over the past three years.

"There is no need for any comment," he said. "The graph speaks for itself."

He said the moving average was useful in showing trends more clearly than the prime data.

"This is the age of the environment and a baby's environment is its nappies, its clothes and bedding and the cleanliness of its food and surroundings," Dr Spratt said.

"Cleanliness does not mean synthetic chemicals and chemically-induced sterility. It means clothes washed with soap and water and feeder bottle and teats, washed and then boiled."

The seasonal-variation of cot death was apparent in the graph and it demonstrated babies were far more at risk in the colder months. That was totally compatible with Dr Spratt's hypothesis.

He hoped parents throughout New Zealand would hear about the experience in Southland and would revert to traditional methods of child care.

"There is so much to be gained," he said, "and nothing to lose."

"How wonderful it would be to see cot deaths drop nationwide, just as they have in Southland. I am certain they would if parents would follow the recommendations."

Dr Spratt has produced a research paper setting out the whole proposition and containing a detailed explanation of the biochemistry which, he suggests, accounts for many cot deaths in New Zealand.

He has submitted his research, to a number of international experts for criticism and comment.

Instructions differ from country to country

Differences between the recommended methods of use for Milton and Napisan brand products in New Zealand and those in the United Kingdom and France have absolutely no safety implications according to the manufacturer Procter and Gamble.

The company was replying to comments from industrial chemist and cot death researcher Dr Jim Spratt that instructions in the UK and France were entirely different from those in New Zealand.

Dr Spratt, who has recently been conducting research in Europe, believes many cot deaths are due to poisoning from chemical residues of baby care products such as Napisan and Milton. If parents wished to use the products they "could probably do so without much risk if they followed the UK instructions," he said.

In New Zealand Napisan Instructions were for nappies to be soaked in the solution and then rinsed and dried with no need for other washing process.

But in the UK and France the instructions the nappies and other clothes and bedding should be put through a washing process after treatment "The preferred method of use is to add the chemical to the prewash if this is available, otherwise it added in with the washing detergent or soap."

"Great stress is laid upon thorough rinsing afterwards."

Spratt said that in the UK he found several chemical products for feeder bottles and teats including the best known in New Zealand, Milton.

The wording in the UK was: "Drain bottles, and rinse with warm, recently-bottled water."

In New Zealand the Instructions, written in italics "for emphasis" said "Do not rinse bottles and teats before use."

However, a spokesman for Procter and Gamble said apparent differences in usage instructions could be due to several factors, including differences in formation, as each product was formulated in a way to best meet local consumer needs and conditions

Another reason for differences could be found in differences in consumer habits and practices - "that is the way in which consumers locally use products with additional consideration to environmental factors such as water hardness and temperatures in the washing process".

The usage instructions on our Milton and Napisan products in New Zealand were designed for New Zealand consumers, their habits and practices and local washing conditions."

Procter and Gamble has in the past described Dr Spratt's cot death reports as irresponsible, unscientific and distorted.