

Cot death debate becomes heated after publication of new research

Following the publication of a new study by researchers based in London, UK, the debate about whether toxic antimony gas biogenerated from PVC mattresses is responsible for sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) has once more hit the UK headlines. Commenting on this report and a book by Jim Sprott published this week, Lady Sylvia Limerick, chair of the UK Expert Group on Cot Death Theories, says the antimony toxic gas theory is being investigated, but so far „there is no evidence of risk to babies" from cot mattress PVC.

In 1989 Barry Richardson reported that mattress contamination with *Scopulariopsis brevicaulis* results in formation of toxic trihydride gases, including stibine from the fire retar-

dant antimony trioxide (Lancet 1990; 335: 670). These gases, he claimed, were responsible for SIDS. A UK government inquiry, set up in 1990 found no evidence for toxic gas generation by mattress PVC and evidence from other research (e.g. Lancet 1995; 345: 1044-45, and 346: 1557-8) has not supported Richardson's theory.

Mike Thompson (Birkbeck College) and Ian Thornton (Imperial College of Science Technology and Medicine), whose work is supported by the Foundation for the Study of Infant Death (FSID), now report that antimony concentrations in household are generally high in relation to amounts in the earth's crust (Environmental Technol 1997; 18: 117-19). „These levels might ac-

count for the observed levels of antimony in babies' tissues and hair". They conclude that „non extreme levels of antimony, whatever its manmade source, are present in houses largely by a general dispersal mechanism". According to FSID these results further discredit the claims of Richardson and Sprott.

The Expert Group's final report on toxic gases and antimony is expected later this year. For now, Limerick and her colleagues have expressed great concerns about a book published on Feb. 27 (*The Cot Death Cover-up*, Jim Sprott, Penguin) which, they say, „contains extensive factual errors and presents an unproven hypothesis as scientific fact", and which will only serve to worry parents further.

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