



Information for Police Officers

Issued on behalf of
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This leaflet has been prepared for use by Police Officers to whom the responsibility of carrying out an investigation into a Cot Death has been delegated. It is hoped that the information contained in the leaflet will be useful and will help you to carry out your task in a caring and sympathetic manner.

Whilst in the eyes of the law a Cot Death falls into the category of Sudden Death and must be investigated on behalf of the Procurator Fiscal there is no doubt that such a death is not a usual sudden death and it will thus require great skill on the part of the officer to complete his enquiries satisfactorily and with tact.

What is a Cot Death?

A Cot Death is the sudden unexpected death of a baby who previously had seemed completely well or had only a minor complaint such as a cold or tummy upset. Such deaths commonly happen when a baby is laid down to sleep in a cot, carrycot or pram or, against our advice to reduce the risk, is sleeping in an adult bed. After a post mortem examination the pathologist will certify the death as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy or Unascertained.

Facts about Cot Death

Cot Death is the single most common cause of infant mortality and statistically around 30-40 babies and young children die, each year, in Scotland. The frequency of Cot Death peaks during the first four months of life and rapidly decreases by the eighth month, to become very rare in the second year of life.

Cot Deaths are more common in boys than girls, in winter months than in summer and in second and later children born in a family.

Cot Deaths can occur within any of the social classes but are more common in deprived areas.

Points to remember when instructed to attend A Cot Death

1. Prior to attending at the locus, obtain a copy of the Information for Bereaved Parents leaflet which is issued by the Scottish Cot Death Trust and should be available at your Station, so that you can give it to the parents.
2. The family with whom you are about to deal will possibly be young and may not have experienced death in anyone as close to them before. They will most likely be in shock.
3. On arrival at the locus explain fully to the family the reasons why the Police have been called, the need for an enquiry to be carried out, the procedures that will have to be followed in relation to the enquiry, the removal of the body and also the requirement for a post mortem examination. This explanation is particularly important as, because of the nature of the death, parents often wrongly blame themselves and feel guilty. They therefore require reassurance that just because the police are conducting an enquiry they do not think that anything untoward has happened.

In a small number of cases there may be suspicion of criminal action, in which case local Force Procedures should be followed.

4. If circumstances permit, prior to removal of the baby from the home give the parents the opportunity to hold their baby and say their "farewell". Police Officers may feel that it is easier for everyone to avoid this but parents may later regret not having been given this chance.

Remember that if denied this facility parents may find it harder to come to terms with their loss.

5. In circumstances where you find it necessary to remove the body ask the parents if you can use the baby's carrycot or pram, if of the detachable type, for the transportation of the baby as at a later date parents often make comment about the mode of transport used and wonder if their baby was left to lie on the rear seat of a police car. The use of a police van should be avoided if at all possible. Always handle the baby as if he/she were still alive e.g. wrap in a shawl, carry with care.
6. If it is necessary to remove bedding or any other items, do so with sensitivity and explain that it might help the pathologist.
7. Make sure that the parents know where the baby is being taken.
8. Inform the parents as soon as possible about the result of the post mortem examination and enquiry, or give a reason for any delay.
9. Contact the parents before returning bedding and clothing in case they do not wish these back.
10. Treat the family with tact, dignity and compassion and in the manner that you would like your own relatives to be dealt with if in similar circumstances.
11. Lastly, point out to the parents the address and telephone number of the Scottish Cot Death Trust at the back of the Information for Bereaved Parents leaflet and inform them that the Trust can offer contact with their bereavement support worker or with another bereaved parent trained to help those who have also lost a baby.