

Wellington Children

Context for midwives on the life and death statistics of babies

By Stephanie Cowan, Director, Change for our Children

Link to Baby Essentials Online education: http://www.changeforourchildren.co.nz/Safe_Start_Programme/Baby_Essentials_Online

Every year, an estimated 35 Wellington children die before their first birthday. This article offers Wellington midwives a context for understanding where to focus in order to reduce the impact of this loss of new life, and a way to measure the collective effort of the region.

Often we practice in a vacuum of statistics. We may work to make a difference to pregnancy and child health outcomes, without timely feedback about what happens to children. Health statistics are reported several years behind, which is a challenge for planners and practitioners alike.

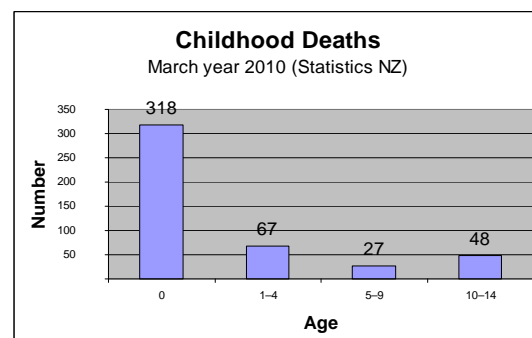
Statistics New Zealand publishes birth, fertility and death data every quarter. It may not specify the details we are wanting, but it is an immediate reality check for life and death statistics for babies. This article is based on the most recent data, for the March to March year, 2010, and is translated into the Wellington context. (www.stats.govt.nz)

In the March 2010 year there were 63951 babies born alive in New Zealand and 6887 of these were from the Wellington region. This is 11% of the population. In this same 12 month period, 318 babies died aged less than 12 months. It seems reasonable to assume that 11% of these deaths were of babies in the Wellington region. This is a toll of **35** children, or 9 deaths every quarter. Not all are preventable, but many are.

It is also reported that 57% of the 318 deaths were of babies aged less than 1 month. From this, estimates for Wellington would be 20 deaths in the more 'critical-to-survival' neonatal period and 15 deaths in the 'safer' postnatal period. We know that sudden unexpected deaths (SUDI) are more likely in the postnatal period, and, at 60 SUDI deaths per year, we can assume that 11% of SUDI happen in the Wellington region. This is 6-7 deaths. Preventing these would take 20% off the infant death toll of the region.

Society has come to accept infant death as normal. Look at the graph below of childhood deaths to see the hugely disproportional number of deaths in the first year. For years, the evidence from research has been shouting from the journals that addressing smoking in pregnancy is the single most effective way to protect the life and health of a child from preventable harm. Yet a third of our babies still develop in smoky wombs.

In Wellington in the next three months, an estimated 1500 babies will be born, 500 will be exposed to smoking in pregnancy and 9 will die. Can we make a difference this quarter?



Yes we can! To make an immediate difference to the survival chances of Wellington babies before November will require us to see **every smoke-exposed baby** as more vulnerable. Most deaths will come from these 500 children. We need to be sure their parents:

- **know** their babies are more vulnerable to death and why
- **use** nicotine replacement products (NRT) if unable to be smokefree,
- **place** their babies 'face-up + face clear' to protect their airways
- **provide** a 'baby bed' (bed designed for babies) to hold their babies' safety every time and place they sleep.