

news

Sleep-related infant deaths report tabled in Parliament

On 7 November 2012, the Western Australian Ombudsman tabled in Parliament an own motion investigation into ways that State Government departments can prevent or reduce sleep-related infant deaths.

The Western Australian Ombudsman reviews certain child deaths, identifies patterns and trends arising from these reviews and makes recommendations about ways to prevent or reduce child deaths.

“In undertaking my child death review function, I identified a need to undertake an investigation into the number of deaths that have occurred after infants have been placed to sleep,” said Western Australian Ombudsman Chris Field.

Over the period 1 July 2009 to 31 December 2011, the Chief Executive Officer of the Department for Child Protection notified the Ombudsman of 242 sudden and unexpected child deaths. Ninety one (38%) of these deaths concerned infants and in 54 (59%) of these cases, the information provided in the notification indicated that the infant appeared to die suddenly and unexpectedly during their sleep.



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What is a sleep-related infant death?

A sleep-related infant death is defined in the report as a death that has occurred after an infant has been placed to sleep. An infant is defined as a child under the age of 12 months.

Agencies involved

The investigation involved the Department of Health, the Department for Child Protection and the Department for Communities.

Findings

The investigation found that the Department of Health has undertaken a range of work to contribute to safe sleeping practices in Western Australia, however, there is still important work to be done.

The Ombudsman said that “this work particularly includes establishing a comprehensive statement on safe sleeping that will form the basis for safe sleeping advice to parents.”

Message from the Ombudsman

Welcome to the second edition of the newsletter for 2012. This has been a very busy, positive and productive year for the office. In this edition we feature a wide range of our work, including the commencement of our new role to review family and domestic violence fatalities, our regional visit to the Pilbara and the tabling of our report into sleep-related infant deaths on 7 November. We have also highlighted our performance in the financial year 2011-12.

With Christmas fast approaching, I take this opportunity to wish you, and your families, a wonderful festive season.



Chris Field



Sleep-related infant deaths report tabled (cont)

“This includes advice on modifiable risk factors, that is sensitive and appropriate to both Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse communities and is consistently applied state-wide by health care professionals and non-government organisations at the antenatal, hospital-care and post-hospital stages,” said Mr Field.

“This statement and concomitant policies and practices should also be adopted, as relevant, by the Department for Child Protection and the Department for Communities.”

The investigation also found that a range of risk factors were prominent in sleep-related infant deaths reported to the Ombudsman’s office.

“Most of these risk factors are potentially modifiable and therefore present opportunities for the departments to assist parents, grandparents and carers to modify these risk factors and reduce or prevent sleep-related infant deaths,” said Mr Field.

Recommendations

Arising from this investigation, the report makes 23 recommendations about ways to prevent or reduce sleep-related infant deaths.

“I am very pleased that each department has agreed to these recommendations and has, more generally, been highly co-operative and positively engaged with our investigation,” said Mr Field.

“Each of these recommendations will be monitored by our office to ensure their implementation and effectiveness in relation to the observations made in the investigation.”

The report titled *Investigation into ways that State Government departments can prevent or reduce sleep-related infant deaths* is available from the Ombudsman’s website at

www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au/infantdeathsreport.

Ombudsman Year in Brief for 2011-12

Complaints

- 11,685 contacts were made with our office including 9,259 enquiries and 2,426 complaints.
- Timely complaint handling meant that 72% of allegations were finalised within 3 months and 99% were finalised within 12 months.
- We recorded very significant improvements in timely complaint handling over the last five years with the average time to finalise complaints decreasing by 42% and finalised complaints older than 12 months decreasing by 85%.
- Complaints to the Ombudsman resulted in improvements to administrative decision making.

Child Death Reviews

- There were 41 child deaths that were investigable by our office.
- Timely review processes have resulted in 68% of reviews being completed in 3 months and 77% of reviews completed in 6 months.
- We identified a number of important patterns and trends in relation to child deaths. Our reviews have also achieved improvements to public administration, designed to prevent or reduce child deaths.
- We undertook significant work on preparing for our new family and domestic violence fatality review function which commenced on 1 July 2012.

In numbers:

11,685 contacts made with the office

72% of allegations finalised within 3 months

99% of allegations finalised within 12 months

85% decrease in complaints older than 12 months over the last five years

Own motion investigations

- We tabled a report on planning for children in care which examined the administration of the care planning provisions of the *Children and Community Services Act 2004*.
- We conducted an own motion investigation into sleep-related infant deaths.

Collaboration and Access to Services

- We continued to work collaboratively with other accountability agencies.
- As part of the Regional Awareness and Accessibility Program, the office continued to provide access to Ombudsman services for Indigenous Western Australians and people living and working in regional areas.

Energy Ombudsman Year in Brief 2011-12

Complaints

- There were 3,602 complaints received comprising:
 - 3,340 electricity complaints; and
 - 262 gas complaints.
- There were 3,769 complaints closed comprising:
 - 3,507 electricity complaints; and
 - 262 gas complaints.

Timeliness

- 76% of electricity complaints, 95% of gas complaints and 77% of all complaints were closed within 10 business days of receiving the complaint.

Issues Raised

- Concerns about billing and credit were the main issues raised in complaints with these issues identified in 82% of complaints received (63% for billing and 19% for credit). Of these:
 - High bills and alleged errors were the most common reasons for billing complaints; and
 - Payment of arrears and debt collection were the most common reasons for credit complaints.

In numbers:

3,602 complaints received

3,340 electricity complaints received

262 gas complaints received

77% of all complaints closed within 10 business days of receiving the complaint

82% of complaints received were about billing and credit issues

Liaison and Access

- Effective relationships with key stakeholders and access to Ombudsman services have been maintained during the year through:
 - Continuous liaison and communication with Energy Ombudsman Scheme member organisations, regulators and Ombudsman industry bodies; and
 - Ensuring ongoing access to Ombudsman services for residential and small use customers, and community groups who may represent them.

Staff profile

Principal Assistant Ombudsman Investigations and Inspections, Karen Whitney



Above: Principal Assistant Ombudsman Investigations and Inspections, Karen Whitney.

We are very pleased to welcome Karen Whitney to the position of Principal Assistant Ombudsman Investigations and Inspections.

Karen joined the office in October bringing with her significant experience gained as a legal practitioner in the WA public sector, including eight years investigating and managing complaints against legal practitioners at the Legal Profession Complaints Committee.

“In my new role at the Ombudsman’s office, I intend to draw on my previous experience in complaint investigation and management, assisting the office to continue achieving efficient, high quality complaint investigations,” said Ms Whitney.

Karen is a legal practitioner with degrees in both Sociology and Law from the United States, as well as a Master of Laws from the University of Western Australia. She has lived in Perth since 1992, and worked for many years as a Lecturer and then Senior Lecturer in Law at the Murdoch and UWA Law Schools.

Connecting with the homeless community

The office of the Ombudsman was one of more than 30 organisations involved in the 2012 Homeless Community Connect.

More than 600 visitors from across the metropolitan area attended the event coordinated by Riverview Community Services in Victoria Park.

Communications Manager, Erin D’Mello, and Principal Investigating and Projects Officer, Jane Burn, attended the event along with staff from the Commonwealth Ombudsman’s office, and said overall it was a very successful day for communicating with people in the homeless community.

“Participating in Homeless Community Connect was an important platform for raising awareness of our services not only to homeless people but also to other Government and non-government agencies and community groups, who work with homeless people,” said Ms D’Mello.



Above: Erin D’Mello (left) and Jane Burn (right) at the Ombudsman’s stand at the 2012 Homeless Community Connect event.

Accountability agencies strengthening links in the Pilbara

Community members from the Pilbara towns of South Hedland, Karratha, Roebourne and Marble Bar had the opportunity to bring their concerns about government agencies to the office of the Ombudsman during August, when the office visited the region as part of the Regional Awareness and Accessibility Program.

The Western Australian Ombudsman, Information Commissioner and staff from the Commonwealth Ombudsman visited the Pilbara to improve awareness of, accessibility to, and use of, the accountability agencies' services in the region.

Western Australian Ombudsman, Chris Field, said the visit provided an opportunity for the local community to speak to officers from the accountability agencies face-to-face.

"Through our complaint clinics, community members were able to raise any concerns they had with a government agency, that they hadn't been able to resolve with that agency directly," said Mr Field.

"We also held seminars for regionally-based public sector agencies and local governments to discuss good administrative practice and effective complaint resolution practices, as well as a seminar for community groups to discuss the role of the accountability agencies and how these agencies can assist in complaint resolution."

Individual meetings were held with Indigenous community members to discuss government service delivery and where accountability agencies may be able to assist. Training and workshops for public sector agencies and local governments were also conducted.

Family and domestic violence fatality review jurisdiction

On 1 July 2012, the office of the Ombudsman commenced a new role to review family and domestic violence fatalities. A family and domestic violence fatality is a death that is caused directly or indirectly by a person who was in a family or domestic relationship with the person who died.

The Ombudsman has a number of functions in relation to this important new role:

- Reviewing the circumstances in which and why family and domestic violence fatalities occur;
- Identifying patterns and trends that arise from reviews of family and domestic violence fatalities; and
- Making recommendations to public authorities about ways to prevent or reduce family and domestic violence fatalities.

More information about the family and domestic violence fatality review function is available on our website at www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au.

10th International Ombudsman Institute World Conference

Ombudsmen from across the globe gathered in Wellington, New Zealand in November for the tenth International Ombudsman Institute (IOI) World Conference. Established in 1978, the IOI has over 150 institutions as members. At the conference the Western Australian Ombudsman, Chris Field, delivered an address titled, *The Western Australian Integrity Coordinating Group*.

Ombudsman elected President of the Australasian & Pacific Ombudsman Region

Chris Field was recently elected President of the Australasian & Pacific Ombudsman Region and a Director of the Board of the International Ombudsman Institute (IOI). The Australasian and Pacific Ombudsman Region consists of Australia, China/Hong Kong, Cook Islands, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Taiwan, Tonga and Vanuatu. Mr Field will be joined on the Board of the IOI by Ombudsmen drawn from around the world, including the Chief Ombudsman of New Zealand, the National Ombudsman of the Netherlands, the Parliamentary Ombudsman of Sweden, the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales, UK and the Ombudsman for Namibia.

Deputy Ombudsman honoured by the Institute of Public Administration Australia

Dr Peter Wilkins, Deputy Ombudsman, was one of the public administrators and academics from across Australia who were honoured at the 2012 Institute of Public Administration Australia (**the Institute**) National Awards Ceremony in Melbourne in September.

The awards were presented by newly elected National President, Terry Moran AC and acknowledged individuals from across the country who have made an outstanding contribution to public administration.

"To become a National Fellow of the Institute is the highest honour for IPAA members," said Mr Moran at the ceremony.

"The 2012 recipients join a pre-eminent group of leaders from across jurisdictions and agencies, who capably demonstrate the qualities and attributes required of their profession. These individuals have also actively contributed to the work of the Institute," he said.

On receiving his Fellowship, Dr Wilkins said he was honoured to be recognised for his contribution to public administration through his delivery of public services, related teaching and research and work with the Institute.

"It was very pleasing to be one of the two West Australians to receive the award in 2012," he said. "I have worked with many highly motivated and capable colleagues who deserve similar recognition, and they make involvement in both the practice and study of public administration rewarding and enjoyable."

Ombudsman Western Australia

Contact Us

To subscribe to this newsletter or give feedback on its contents, email newsletter@ombudsman.wa.gov.au

Level 2
469 Wellington St
PERTH
WA 6000

PO Box Z5386
St Georges Tce
PERTH
WA 6831

Telephone: (08) 9220 7555
or 1800 117 000 (free call)

Facsimile: (08) 9220 7500

Email: mail@ombudsman.wa.gov.au

Web: www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au