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Infant apparel will carry messages about SIDS Parents who lost son to syndrome kick off effort to reduce risk

BY BILL LOHMANN
 TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Mar 30, 2006

Four years ago, Hayes Hitzeman died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Yesterday, his spirit moved his parents to launch a public crusade they hope will spare other families the grief they will carry the rest of their lives.

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Kyra Oliver Hitzeman and her husband, Ezra Hitzeman, kicked off the This Side Up campaign that will feature "onesies" imprinted on the front with the slogan, "This Side UP . . . while sleeping."

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that babies sleep on their backs and not on their sides or bellies. It is among a number of recommendations aimed at reducing the risk of SIDS, some of which are printed on the back of the one-piece bodysuits:

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The onesies will be given to parents of infants born at VCU Medical Center and CJW Medical Center.

Both hospitals announced yesterday that they will finance the production of the onesies for the next year. Virginia Hospital Laundry Inc. has agreed to use the T-shirts that snap at the bottom in the nine Virginia hospitals it services.

Oliver Hitzeman is executive director of the Hayes Hitzeman Foundation, which she and her husband established a few days after their son's death. She expects to expand the onesie-giveaways to several hospitals in her home state of Tennessee. She hopes it will eventually become a national program.

SIDS refers to the sudden and unexplained death of an infant under 1 year of age, and it remains the No. 1 cause of death among babies in that age group.

More than 2,000 babies still die nationwide each year from SIDS, according to the AAP, although that number has been reduced by half since a government-sponsored "Back to Sleep" campaign was launched in 1994. The AAP revised its recommendations last November, reinforcing its earlier advice promoting babies sleeping on their backs and saying side-sleeping can be as dangerous as belly-sleeping.

With the background voices of three dozen jabbering babies modeling the outfits at yesterday's news conference at the Children's Museum of Richmond, Richmond pediatrician Dr. Colleen Kraft said continued public education is critical to reducing the number of babies who die from SIDS.

"In many ways, we're kind of circling the issue because we don't know what causes [SIDS]," said Kraft, vice president of the AAP's Virginia chapter and the Walter E. Bundy Jr. professor of pediatrics at VCU.

But by addressing factors that researchers believe to be involved in SIDS, she said, physicians, parents and caregivers can reduce the risks.

Oliver Hitzeman has raised nearly \$200,000 for the foundation in her son's name, which has previously financed grants to community groups that educate the public about SIDS. She considers the launch of This Side Up to be a start and not a conclusion.

"We still have much work to do," she said. "If I can help somebody not go through what I've gone through, I've done my job."

Contact staff writer Bill Lohmann at wlohmann@timesdispatch or (804) 649-6639.

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