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COMMENT

Get real on defence

EVERYONE knows that Britain is America's closest ally – we have been told often enough by UK Prime Ministers and Defence Secretaries.

So it was inevitable that when Sir Michael Fallon met his American opposite number yesterday the two men would try to map out a common approach to the problems facing both countries.

It is easy to talk tough about Russia, but Britain is skating on thin ice when it cajoles European allies to match the UK's commitment to Nato's funding target of spending two per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defence.

Last year only the UK, the US, Poland, Greece and Estonia met the target.

But the ugly truth is that Britain only squeaked across the line by using some pretty creative accounting about what actually constitutes defence spending (such as pension payments to ex-servicemen and women).

Ever since Donald Trump called into question his commitment to Article Five – the mutual defence of Europe – Nato has been in turmoil.

To its credit, the UK has stepped up with troops deployed in Estonia and extra aircraft for Eastern Europe but our forces have been so brutally pared to the bone that ours can only be a token effort.

Sir Michael wants our European partners – particularly Germany – to increase their spending on defence. But is this realistic?

If Germany boosts its military budget to meet Nato's two per cent of GDP figure it will be out-spending Russia. Such a thing is politically impossible for Angela Merkel.

Tensions between Russia and Nato are probably at their worst since the end of the Cold War.

Britain needs to play its part by deterring aggression with a robust defence policy.

We cannot do that by toeing the US line and hanging our European allies out to dry.

What do you think?
echo@nne.co.uk

Write to: The Editor, Hear All Sides, The Northern Echo, PO Box 14, Priestgate, Darlington, DL1 1NF.

Fax: 01325-360754

email: echo@nne.co.uk

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QUALITY

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Getting baby safely to sleep



SAFETY ADVICE: Babies should be put to be on their backs to help avoid the risk of sudden infant death syndrome

Picture: DANNY LAWSON/PA Wire

DESPITE the success of the Back to Sleep campaign 25 years ago – led by TV star Anne Diamond whose son Sebastian tragically died at four months old – worrying figures show that the number of babies succumbing to sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) in Yorkshire, is rising, against a trend of decreasing deaths nationally.

A recent poll by the Lullaby Trust showed that up to four-in-10 new parents were still unaware of the most basic measure of reducing their baby's risk of SIDS, that being placing them on their back when going to sleep.

As the name suggests, SIDS is the sudden, unexplained death of a baby assumed to be previously fit and well. It typically occurs in the first six months of life and is more common in premature or low birthweight babies. There is a higher occurrence in boys than girls. In the 1970s and 80s it almost became an epidemic, with an incidence of one in every 250 live births, compared to one in 3,000 today. It struck families irrespective of social class.

A Bristol academic, Dr. Peter Fleming, worked tirelessly with families who had lost a baby to SIDS, examining the factors that were prevalent in these cases, only looking at sleeping position almost to rule it out as a risk factor. Despite overwhelming evidence showing a link between sleeping position and SIDS, the medical community initially rejected his data, as it had not been obtained through controlled trials. This all changed with the death of baby Sebastian, with Anne Diamond confronting the then Health Secretary to make this piece of information a public health campaign of immediate importance.

Since then the number of deaths in England and Wales has dropped from 1,545 in 1989 to fewer than 200 last year. Although in the almost 30 years that have passed, we still have not found the actual cause of SIDS, there is a greater awareness of the factors that increase the risk as well as how to hopefully reduce your baby's chances of succumbing.

The dos and don'ts are refreshingly simple



With latest research suggesting that babies who succumb to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome are more likely to be unwell in the few days beforehand, North East GP **Dr Zak Uddin** examines a frightening disease that at one point almost became an epidemic

and can be summarised as follows.

Do place your baby on their back to sleep. They should be placed in the "feet to foot position", with their feet gently touching the bottom of the cot. Do make sure that your baby's head is uncovered, with sheets no higher than their shoulders. Use light sheets, and avoid heavy bedding in which they may become entangled and potentially struggle to breathe. For the first six months, do position your baby's cot in the same room as that in which you sleep, so that you are immediately aware if they become distressed. Adequate heat is important, with a room temperature between 16-20 degrees Centigrade currently recommended.

Do not place your baby on their front when they are about to sleep. Do not go to sleep with your baby in a chair or bed, especially if you are under the influence of alcohol, as you may unknowingly roll over onto them.

Smoking is one of the most modifiable risk factors in reducing your baby's risk of SIDS.

New evidence from the Royal Leicester Hospital has suggested that babies who died of SIDS were more likely to have had a prodromal illness in the days beforehand, so if you are worried about your baby being unwell, please access same-day medical ad-

vice. Situations which should prompt you to call 999 immediately are if you find your baby unresponsive or you can't wake them, if they are struggling to breathe, or if they have a fit, even if this is followed by recovery.

The heartache of losing a baby to a disease still not fully understood, or indeed any disease, should not be underestimated, with some parents still mourning the loss of what could have been, decades after the event.

Today there are many charities working with families to hopefully make this pain more bearable, as well as providing some understanding of what happened. The advice as to how to reduce the chances of SIDS is very simple, so is vitally important that all new parents and indeed anyone looking after a new baby, make themselves familiar with the dos and don'ts, as well as when to seek medical help. All appropriately trained doctors will be more than happy to see a baby immediately if there is any concern over their health or wellbeing.

USEFUL WEBSITES

Lullaby Trust: lullabytrust.org.uk
American Sudden Infant Death Syndrome Institute: sids.org

'If you are worried about your baby being unwell, please access same-day medical advice'

Dr Zak Uddin