

Dealing with the downside of “Back to Sleep”

WHEN Sophie Lucas was a baby, a specialist told her parents she would grow out of her misshapen head. Unfortunately, she didn't. Four years later, surgery was needed to balance out the bulbous lump on one side of the back of her head with the flat patch on the other.

Though Sophie's case was at the more serious end of the scale, her craniofacial surgeon Charles Davis says clinicians have seen “huge numbers” of children with flat heads since the introduction of a campaign to reduce cot death rates.

“This condition is really, really common to varying degrees . . . I think the problem is underestimated and a lot of parents get told it will get better.”

“It's certainly not true that they will all get better.”

The “Back to Sleep” campaign was

introduced in the early 1990s to encourage parents to put babies to sleep on their backs. It has been credited with a fall in the number of cot deaths.

Sophie's father, Brett Lucas, observes: “It seems there's just about a generation of kids coming through with flat heads.”

Mr Davis said it was important for parents to act as soon as a head-shape problem emerged. “As soon as they notice the flat spot they have to do whatever it takes to fix it.”

They should give their children plenty of supervised “tummy time” during the day and use tactics such as putting toys on different sides of the cot to encourage them to change their head position. Parents should also check their infants were upright in car seats.

Though flat heads did not cause any neurological problems, they could be-

come problematic when a child became a teenager. “I think we underestimate the psychological problems we might produce down the track when you get wonky-shaped heads,” he said.

Deformities can arise quickly because a newborn's skull is soft but as it gets older, it hardens.

Mr Davis said surgery like Sophie's needed to be carried out when children were young and before their skulls had hardened too much. Her brain would quickly mould to her new skull shape.

Plunket advises parents to always sleep babies on their back and never on their side or front. But they should alternate their child's head position to the left and right, change the position of their cot and encourage them to look in different directions by moving around toys and posters. The organisation also recommends having “tummy time”

when the baby is awake, with parents watching their child.

But it seems some parents are worried enough about the shapes of their children's heads to ignore the risk of sudden infant death syndrome (Sids).

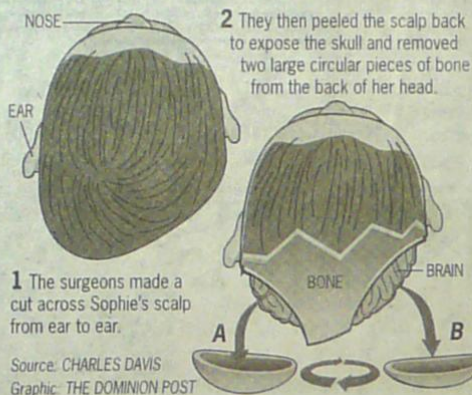
In a study published this year, Auckland University researchers found more than one-third of babies were still sleeping on their stomachs or sides, because parents feared they would develop flat heads.

They surveyed 400 mothers and found 65 per cent laid their babies on their backs, as recommended, but 32 per cent used the side position and 3 per cent put their babies on their stomachs.

Aside from fears about misshapen heads, those who chose side or front positions were also worried their babies could choke on vomit in their sleep and would not sleep as well on their backs.

► HEAD SCULPTING

Wellington surgeons Charles Davis and Agadha Wickremesekera removed pieces of bone from Sophie Lucas' skull and swapped them around to fix her deformational plagiocephaly (flat head).



Source: CHARLES DAVIS
Graphic: THE DOMINION POST