

Popular bassinet is linked to 2 deaths

Federal officials probing whether products have design flaw in which babies become trapped and hang to death

By Patricia Callahan and Sam Roe

TRIBUNE REPORTERS

One of the most popular bassinets in America has been linked to at least two babies' deaths, and federal authorities are investigating whether the products have a deadly design flaw, the Tribune has learned.

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, which regulates most children's products, knew about the first baby's death within days after it happened last September in Missouri but did not recall the product. Then last Thursday, a Kansas baby died in a similar bassinet.

The deaths once again raise questions about the safety commission's response to deadly hazards, the subject of a Pulitzer Prize-winning Tribune investigation last year.

Because of the baby's death last week, the commission's staff is planning to seek an imminent hazard warning, a rare move that sidesteps a voluntary recall to more quickly alert the public of a potentially deadly product, the Tribune has



Kennedy Brotherton Jones

Problem product

Simplicity 4-in-1 Winnie the Pooh bassinet

Model Nos. 3112DOH6, 3112DOH7

SOURCES: Police and The Associated Press

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learned. Such a move requires a vote by the commission.

Both deaths involved the Simplicity 4-in-1 Winnie the Pooh bassinet. But many other Simplicity 3-in-1 and 4-in-1 models share the same design. Last year, Simplicity recalled more than 1 million cribs in the wake of a Tribune investigation that showed the commission waited years to warn consumers about the cribs' flaws, despite babies' deaths. The bassinets were not included in that recall.

Simplicity Inc. ran into financial trouble after the crib recall. SFCA Inc., a unit of Blackstreet Capital Partners, acquired the assets of Simplicity Inc. in a foreclosure sale in May. An SFCA executive declined to comment Wednesday.

The Simplicity bassinets consist of a metal frame with fabric sides. At least one of the fabric sides folds down so a parent can easily reach a baby when the bassinet is positioned at a parent's bedside.

The design allows the parent to fold down the fabric so that one of the metal supports is exposed. This gives the parent the best view of the baby, but creates a gap. Babies' chests or heads can get caught between the metal support and the mattress. Trapped, they hang to death.

That's what happened last week to Kennedy Brotherton Jones, a 6-month-old in Shawnee, Kan., who was put to bed in a Simplicity bassinet with model number 3112DOH7, according to Shawnee Police Capt. Ron Copeland.

"If I had one of these bassinets and one of my grandchildren was sleeping in it, I would make sure my adult kids knew not to use it," Copeland said.

Melissa Brotherton, Ken-



McDonald County Press photo by Gerald Elkins

McDonald County Sheriff's Deputy Jeff Sutherland looks over the Simplicity bassinet in which a Missouri baby died.

nedy's aunt, described the family's horror of finding the baby hanging lifeless from her bassinet.

"Her feet were dangling," Brotherton said. "The only thing that was holding her up was her head."

Kennedy's family is pressing for a recall. "We do not want this to happen to another family," she said. "The night this happened we immediately came home and said, 'My God! Did we miss a recall?'"

She said the family went online and looked, and "that's when we found the other family in southern Missouri."

Last September, Katelyn Marie Simon, a 4-month-old in Noel, Mo., died after she became trapped in her Simplicity bassinet, records show. A family friend said he found her "hanging partially out of the bassinet and partially inside the bassinet with her legs dangling from the bassinet and her head and arms inside the bassinet," an investigator for the Consumer Product Safety Commission wrote last October.

Commission spokeswoman Julie Vallese said the agency

did not recall the bassinet last fall because "the investigation of a baby's death in October 2007 remains open because there are still questions surrounding the circumstances of that baby's death."

But McDonald County Coroner B.J. Goodwin III said there was no doubt the death was an accident. "It was clear-cut," he said. "We all felt it was the crib that caused the passing."

"It wasn't like we felt the parents were negligent," Goodwin added. "The home was clean. The baby was well-cared for."

Goodwin said he ordered an autopsy and, in the end, ruled the death an accident. If anyone thought otherwise, he said, "I would have been notified."

He said he found the bassinet extremely unsafe. "I felt it should never have been allowed on the market. I hate that another child passed because of this problem," he said.

Jeff Slaton, attorney for the Simon family, which has filed a wrongful-death suit against Simplicity and Wal-Mart, said, "I'm at a loss on why it took so long" for the safety commission to act.

He said he asked the commission to recall the bassinet days after the death but never heard back from the agency.

The agency investigator who looked into Katelyn's death in Missouri last fall plans to visit Kennedy's family and the Shawnee Police Department on Thursday.

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