

Background on Wahakura:

The Wahakura is a flax bassinet for babies from birth to 6 months. Based on traditional design, the Wahakura has been developed for a modern context. The wahakura provides a protected space for baby where the combination of maternal smoking and co-sleeping is present.

The Wahakura is an indigenous, homegrown response to a problem that affects Maori. Maori infants are at highest risk of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) than other ethnic groups. Although the Maori SIDS death rate has fallen, it is still 1.5 times higher than Pacific Island infants and 6 times higher than all other ethnicities. SIDS remains the major cause of infant death in the postneonatal period.

Maternal smoking combined with an infant sharing a bed with a parent who smokes, significantly increases the risk of SIDS. Despite best efforts to promote smokefree pregnancies, maternal smoking remains high among Maori women. The lethal combination of these risk factors is more common for Maori infants than other infants in New Zealand.

The Wahakura mitigates these combined SIDS risk factors and also protects baby from being accidentally smothered by another person or blankets in a co-sleeping situation. Furthermore, mother and baby can still enjoy close proximity with one another, important for bonding and breastfeeding.

The first Wahakura project was instigated in Gisborne where local weavers produced 100 wahakura to be distributed to whanau by Nga Maia midwives. The evaluation of this project highlighted the positive experiences of whanau who used the wahakura, perceived health benefits to infant development and the opportunities for midwives to promote health messages.

In 2008, the Maori SIDS team coordinated a national wananga at Gisborne. The making and distribution of Wahakura draws on the unique skills of both the weaving and health communities. At learning wananga throughout the country, weavers and health workers are invited to learn the art of making Wahakura and the information on safe use of the Wahakura for protection against SIDS.

Reference: Kawerongo Public Health Ass. Maori Caucus Newsletter, Issue Five, Feb 09