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Y2K bug proved a turn-on

By Josh Gordon, Canberra
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THE Y2K bug may have been a fizzer, but the new millennium certainly appears to have ignited sparks in the bedroom. Perhaps it was the frivolous abandon that comes with knowing the end is nigh. Perhaps it was the relief when civilisation continued. Or perhaps it was the champagne.

Whatever the reason, economic modelling by Melbourne University and the Australian National University has found a "statistically significant" increase in conceptions and births around the time of early January 2000.

The paper, by Joshua Gans and Andrew Leigh, said that in the first week of the new millennium there were up to 23 more conceptions a day and up to 80 more births a day than normal.

The total average number of conceptions increased by 4 per cent, while the number of births rose an astonishing 12 per cent.

"In particular, the sharp increase in the birth rate on January 1, 2000, suggests that the precise timing of childbirth may be highly responsive to non-medical factors," the paper said. "Any economic or medical studies of the timing of births, conceptions and perhaps deaths will need to take account of auspicious dates."

Australians also appeared to have delayed dying as a result of the new millennium, with the number of deaths 4 per cent higher than normal.

Although it was less confident about a statistical link, the paper said the figures suggested that some people had held on for an extra few days or weeks to experience the milestone.

"Deaths may be shifted either because patients will themselves to stay alive longer, or because they and their families agree to keep life support machines operating until the beginning of the new millennium," it said.

The number of births might have been caused either because parents strategically timed conception in March or April 1999, or because doctors had agreed to shift the timing of the birth, the paper said.

"An increase in the number of conceptions in January 2000 could be caused by anything from an excess of millennial champagne to relief that the Y2K bug proved toothless."

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