



Shleep well with Aussie wool

By **WENDY GOULD**

FORGET counting sheep to get to sleep. Now it's more about cuddling up with them, or at least their famous fleece, that's having the biggest impact on quality slumber.

And while taking wool into the bedroom is not new, one Aussie start-up is doing it in a more holistic way with a modern touch that's set to strike a healthy chord.

The cleverly-named Shleep is the brainchild of Canadian born, brand marketing and advertising specialist Indi Maini and Jonathan Ward, an Aussie farm kid and wool classer turned international fashion designer.

Having grown up on a wool producing property at Tottenham in New South Wales, his exposure was immediate and long lasting through his own label Jonathan Ward Couture and as former head designer for RM Williams for 15 years.

Her conversion, though now equally as ingrained, is far more recent, sparked by her husband, Australian Wool Innovation chief executive officer Stuart McCullough.

They met through mutual friends when he was based in New York as AWI's marketing and commercialisation manager and she was working in 'The Big Apple' for some of the world's leading brand marketing and advertising agencies.

"I knew nothing of wool at that time," Ms Maini said.

"My perception was it was itchy, scratchy, not contemporary and certainly not luxurious.

"And if I thought bedding, the image in my head was bulky, heavy Hudson's Bay army blankets.

"But my eyes were opened to wool's high performance properties, namely its thermal management qualities such as breathability, moisture regulation and the fact that it is warm in winter and equally cool in summer," she said.

"And I also saw that wool, and specifically Australian Merino wool could be super lightweight and as soft and luxurious as any of the world's luxury fibres.

"I was literally blown away."

The seed to work with Australian Merino wool was sown and Ms Maini mulled over several concepts but it was not until her relocation to Australia 10 years ago that she settled on the concept of better sleep, health and well-being, heroing Australian Merino wool as the best natural solution.

"Poor sleep and lack of sleep across all age groups is a world wide problem with dramatic consequences on people's productivity, health and well-being," she said.

"There is so much research around to show that sleeping surrounded by wool gets you to sleep 25 per cent faster and fosters longer and deeper sleep, both crucial for rejuvenation and a better lifestyle.

"It just made perfect sense."

So it was down the track of sheep derived to ensure you're not sleep deprived.

Ms Maini had to cut her own path and after one false start with unaligned partners, she said joining forces with Jonathan was integral in bringing the vision to life.

"It's nerve-racking when every decision stops with you and hard starting and growing a business with limited budget (in contrast to the corporates of her marketing days)," she said.

She and Mr Ward spent two years tweaking designs with their Korean manufacturer, gauging public sentiment and setting their messaging and Shleep was finally launched as an online retailer in late May.

The result is a mix of flair and practicality in a product range of 28 sleep related items, dominated by Australian Merino wool and perfect for infants through to seniors.

As part of their Shleep total system of sleep, there are wool lined or filled pillows, pillowcases, fitted sheets, plus a wool-lined duvet cover which can be used solo in summer or combined with two weights of duvets for extra warmth in autumn and winter.

For super luxury, Shleep has also created a one of a kind superfine 20 micron fleece blanket and underlay.

And in the children's range they offer 100pc fine Merino wool stroller liners and foot muffs, play mats and a variety of swaddle gift sets.

The colour palette is neutral and contemporary in tones of white, wheat, navy and cream and almost all products are machine washable.

Mr Ward said they wanted to start small and manageable with an absolute focus on quality and build slowly.

"Rolling out new ranges along the way is good for ongoing interest in the label but also allows us to be flexible and agile in meeting changing trends," he said.

"The potential really is unlimited



Shleep's half moon logo depicting sun up and sun down, reflects the brand's around the clock approach to a person's health, happiness and well-being.



Shleep founder and CEO Indi Maini and head of design Jonathan Ward with some of their products in the company's Sydney head office.

and we have a large concepts board on the wall of the office with proposed new colours and future focus points such as pet bedding, glamping (glamour or luxury camping), sleepwear and travel.

"I spent a fair bit of my youth sleeping in a swag but our camping bedding will be considerably better than that!"

Given wool's air cleansing and sound-proofing properties, soft furnishings for optimising quality of sleep such as curtains are also potentially on the drawing board.

While Shleep's current range of products is clearly sleep focussed, its motto of 'makers of the best mornings ever' suggests a broader emphasis on the waking life and the entire health, happiness and well-being of a person.

And its half moon logo reflecting sun up and sun down also highlights the around-the-clock approach.

"Wool is the hottest fibre in the world right now and connecting wool and well-being makes sense given its amazing natural and eco friendly credentials," Mr Ward said.

"We will be looking at new technology, creative blends and opportunities to work with world's best partners in the future.

"We remain an Australian company with Australian-designed products championing Australian wool but operating in a global space," he said.

Current collaborator and key to the quality of Shleep products is their Korean manufacturer.

"It is a family owned company, a Woolmark licensee run by a sister and brother team which specialises in bedding and has 80 franchise stores throughout Korea," Ms Maini said.

"The sister learned about wool

starting with how to shear a sheep and spin yarn from German Christian missionaries.

"Her mission was originally to provide work for residents following the collapse of the local mining industry.

"They have been invested in wool, in bedding and in guaranteeing quality for many years," she said.

"Being able to work directly with them means we can collaborate on designs and products and potential-

ly even customise ranges for particular customers.

"For instance if a boutique hotel chain wanted a specialised range of bedding or our products in specific colours we could do it."

Other collaborations have been with manufacturers and designers in Italy, China and Prague using their particular expertise for some specialist lines.

The Shleep range includes two exclusive to Shleep fabrics, ShleepTight and ShleepSkin.

Australian designed ShleepTight is an 18.5 micron, 100pc fine Merino wool woven fabric that is water and wind resistant, plus 50 UPF+woven product, and is described as a natural wool version of Gortex.

It is ideal for outer layering to protect against the elements but given its superior softness is also perfect for next to skin contact and outdoor sleep-on-the-go products such as the foot muffs and play mats.

ShleepSkin was designed and patented by the Koreans who worked out how to loop fine Merino wool together to create a product that breathes and enabling 20 micron fleece to be successfully used in bedding, particularly underlays in place of the coarser, more standard 30 micron fibre.

Having taken a contemporary approach to some classic products, Shleep's target market is broad with the hotspots considered to be China and USA.

"The Chinese are educated on wool benefits and with its emerging

affluence wool is highly featured in the spending habits of the wealthier," Mr Ward said.

Given her heritage and her background Ms Maini's leaning was to the US but said six weeks in it was China that had shown the significant early interest with discussions underway with two companies in particular.

Despite this company attention, the home or individual buyer remains equally important to Shleep and feedback from early orders, dispatched factory direct, suggests a good mix of personal and gift buying.

And while being better in the bedroom may satisfy a dream for many of its global customers, the real winners in the Shleep boudoir are Australia's woolgrowers whose unique product remains front and centre.

For more on Shleep visit: shleepwell.com

Instagram: @shleep_well or Facebook: @shleepwell



A happy baby warm and cosy wrapped in wool in its stroller and set for the elements outdoors protected by Shleep's unique 100 per cent wool outerlayer.



These woollen swaddling cloths in navy and cream have clearly been well received by these twins.



▲ The Shleep playmat, transportable and machine washable.

◀ Luxurious soft woollen bedding from Shleep ensures a better night's sleep and a healthier, happier waking day.