NEWS AND NOTES

ANEC—a new organisation for European consumers

ANEC—the European Association for the Coordination of Consumer Representation in Standardisation—has been created to focus the consumer’s response to European standardisation. It will represent both European Union (EU) and EFTA (European Free Trade Association) consumers. It will consist of a general assembly with nominees from EU and EFTA countries, as well as the EU and EFTA consumer consultative committees. The secretariat will be held by the European Secretariat for the Coordination of Standardisation (SECO), the existing EU funded commission which promotes consumer participation in the standardisation process.

ANEC will have the following aims:

- To ensure that the interests of consumers are represented in the work of European standards organisations and other similar bodies
- To comment on relevant general policy issues
- To comment on relevant draft directives, and to formulate proposals for incorporating consumer related issues in standards
- To provide the means of improving consumer representation in the European standardisation process

To achieve these aims ANEC will consider a number of tasks; setting consumer priorities, nomination of consumer representatives, coordination of national positions, and establishment of contacts with other organisations.

One challenge facing ANEC is access for consumers to the decision making process. There is good representation of consumers at the technical level, but little access higher up the organisation structures, for example on the European Committee for Standardization (CEN) technical board. Another challenge is the principle that decision making with regard to European standards rests with national delegations. Consumers can exert influence only by lobbying their own national bodies. ANEC can act to mobilise and coordinate national lobbying, and to campaign for direct access to technical bodies. ANEC will require proper funding if it is to be successful, and to expand its role to international projects that may be adopted as European standards. There is no doubt that there remains an enormous amount of work to be done before we can say that there is adequate consideration of consumer interests in standardisation. Given the impetus of ANEC’s establishment, and the state of the development of the existing technical coordination structure, there is every reason to be optimistic that if there is an adequate level of funding ANEC will ensure strong consumer representation in the European standardisation process.

International standardisation

Two trends have increased the importance of international standardisation. These are the drive towards the liberalisation of trade and the tendency towards deregulation. The single most important development in the liberalisation of trade has been the conclusion of the Uruguay round of the GATT negotiations. This contains a specific appeal for countries to use international standards as a basis for technical regulations and for countries to participate actively in the work of international standards bodies. International standards will also form the starting point for complaints procedures. One trend towards trade liberalisation is also apparent in the creation of trading blocks such as those in Europe (EU and EFTA), North America (NAFTA), South America (MERCOSUR) and South East Asia (ASEAN).

There are over 28 international standards bodies but the International Standards Organisation (ISO) and the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) account for over 80% of these. ISO and IEC are sister organisations, with ISO covering all technology except electrotechnology, which is covered by IEC. The scope of their work is enormous, covering the consumer everyday items such as toys, cars, and tools, and also sophisticated information technology. Current ISO work items of particular interest to consumers include draft standards on child restraints in cars, product safety, life cycle analysis, and ecolabelling. Consumers are also particularly interested in the work to include environmental aspects in product standards. Current IEC activities include household appliances, electrical tools, and plugs and sockets. ISO and IEC formally cooperate with CEN and the European Committee for Electrotechnical Standardization (CENELEC) on the coordination of work. Currently, about 40% of product standards and 90% of electrotechnology standards adopted in Europe are identical to the corresponding ISO or IEC standards.

Consumer representation at the international level may take place through national delegations, but few countries have mechanisms to include consumers in national groups. COPOLCO is the Consumer Policy Committee of ISO, and its members are nominated by national bodies. It meets once a year but many of its delegates are not active consumer representatives. Nevertheless, it has been instrumental to date in keeping consumer issues near the top of ISO’s agenda. However, COPOLCO’s failure to be fully representative, and the enormous importance that international standards are set to assume after GATT demands the presence of an independent consumer voice in standardisation. The International Organisation of Consumer Unions (IOCU) has over 200 member organisations from over 100 countries from all around the world. It is well placed to represent the interests of consumers in standardisation. It has liaison status allowing it to participate in the technical work. This has been adopted as one of its six priority areas. This will see the establishment of a global policy and campaigns committee to help direct IOCU’s efforts in standardisation. A network is also to be established to ensure that the views given are representative of IOCU’s membership in general.

Consumers are encouraged to participate at the international level if they are to be truly a part of the decision making process. As in Europe this consumer representation can best be effected by a combination of national and international lobbying, at both the technical and political levels. It is, therefore, vitally important that this organisation be firmly established on the international consumer agenda.

BRUCE FARQUHAR

Airbags and rear facing baby seats don't mix

Airbags are a highly effective way of protecting car occupants in crashes. So are rear facing baby seats. But put the two together and you have a potentially unsafe system as the explosive power of an inflating passenger side airbag can seriously damage a baby seat mounted on a car’s front passenger seat.

In the short term, the public must be told that if their car has a passenger side airbag, their baby seat must be used in the back. Most car owners would know whether their own car has an airbag, but it may be a lot less obvious if they are travelling in a friend’s or relative’s car, or one that they have rented.

In the US, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) requires an airbag label on new vehicles’ sun visors. In cars with no rear seats, NHTSA is proposing to allow car manufacturers to install manual cut-out switches for passenger side airbags until 1998.

In the member states of the European Union, the European Commission admits that it has no power of compulsion over car manufacturers, except through directives which must be approved by the member states — so progress is slow. A recent survey by a consumer magazine in the UK found a car with a voluntary warning label stuck on the door pillar, invisible when the door was closed!

In the longer term, the proposed ISOFIX method of attaching child restraints in cars may provide the solution as it will, theoretically, be possible to build in electronic interlocks that detect the presence of a baby seat and disarm the airbag. But this solution is still several years away, so everyone with the opportunity to educate the public — and apply pressure to governments and car makers — must ensure that the right message gets home.

Finally, it has to be stressed that the adverse interaction is only between rear facing baby seats and airbags. Forward facing child seats can still be used safely on front passenger seats fitted with airbags, although the normal advice is that they are usually better used in the rear.

MIKE HAYES

US injury and poisoning hospitalization report

Based on data from the National Hospital Discharge Survey, a continuous voluntary survey conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics since 1973, a report on hospitalizations for injury and poisoning in the US for 1991 was released last October (Hall and Owings, No 24, DHHS publication No 94-1250). Despite continuing difficulties arising from missing E-codes, the report is of very considerable interest. Apart from reaffirming the well-known high poisoning injury is ‘the leading cause of hospital admissions for people younger than 45 years of age and the leading cause of death in this same age group’, it provides statistics of special interest for those concerned with children and
adolescents. For those under 15 years the hospitalization rate was 51.9 per 10,000, while in the next age group, 15–24 years, the rate was nearly double, 102.7 per 10,000. (This was similar to the rate for those 45–64, and only exceeded by that for those over 65 years.) Fractures were the most common cause overall, but those under 15 years had the lowest fracture rate (18.9), while the 15–24 group had a rate of 30.8, as well as having the highest laceration rate (14.8). Of interest is that for the under 15s, intracranial injuries and poisoning were the second and third ranked causes for admission. A useful methodologic postscript to this report is an analysis and discussion of the use of E-codes. Among children under 5 the per cent with E-codes is 56.8, while for those 5–14 it is only 45.5.

A multilingual water safety guide

The Swiss Accident Prevention Bureau has produced a detailed guide to safety of small areas of water such as ponds and swimming pools, intended mainly for domestic situations but is also applicable for schools, hotels, etc. The guide differs from other publications in giving considerable detail on features such as pond design, covers and fencing, with comprehensive diagrams to make safety precautions clear and easy to follow. The guide is available in German, French, and Italian. For more information, contact the Swiss Accident Prevention Bureau, CH 3001 Bern, Laupenstrasse 11, Postfach 8236, Switzerland.

SARA LEVENE

Higher penalties set by Labor Department for violations that result in death, injury

The US Department of Labor announced new, higher penalties for child labour violations that lead to serious injury or death of a minor that came into effect on 16 June 1994. Under the new guidelines the maximum fine will increase from a flat US$10,000 to US$30,000 for each violation leading to a serious injury or death.


In most parts of the Western world, expenditure on health is falling under the scrutiny of the baleful eyes of cost accountants and the like, while, as it was stated in the book's foreword are charged with looking for 'best buys'. However the authors of the foreword go on to note that 'health promotion does not lend itself to such scrutiny'. Despite this inherent difficulty, the authors of the book have done an excellent job. If this book is consulted before any particular health promotion strategy is embarked upon, readers will save themselves hours of potentially fruitless activity. It should be waved under the noses of those who seek to absolve themselves from any perceived responsibilities regarding a particular hazard by earnestly advising you to 'run an education campaign'. Readers can learn what hasn't worked and what does work in the way of health promotion activities in the field of child accident prevention.

The editor welcomes contributions for the News and Notes section

BOOK REVIEWS


Hugh Jackson was working in the field of child injury prevention before many readers of the journal could spell the word 'accident'. Therefore any publication that bears his name is of serious importation. As the authors state in their preface, the book is really an account of the experiences in childhood accident prevention. While this means that the vast majority of the material is based on the UK situation the issues are equally relevant to other countries. The authors have not attempted to be exhaustive—thus there is no attempt to address the problem of childhood accidents in the third world. (But in passing it should not be overlooked that one of the commonest ICD codes used in the Pacific Islands is that recording 'hit on head by falling coconut'.) The format of the book follows a logical progression. The extent of the problem of childhood accidents is covered in chapter 1 (it is a pity the statistics only go as far as 1988). The question as to why children have accidents, is addressed in chapter 2 and the relevance of such factors as the environment, developmental stages, and social class are discussed briefly. Thereafter, accidents occurring in different environmental locations are considered in separate chapters—for example on the road, in the home, at school, on the farm. A standard format is followed. Information is given on who, when, and where; then the nature of the particular injuries sustained is outlined; and finally specific advice on prevention is detailed. Each chapter is packed full of practical information and advice. There is also a chapter devoted to the topic of prevention as well as one containing an overview of the responsibilities of different sectors as regards prevention. The book also contains a selective bibliography. Children and their Accidents is really written for parents. While every effort has been made to present the material simply and clearly the sad reality is it is unlikely to be read by those who would most benefit from it. It could be a useful resource book for field workers seeking to convey information on child accident prevention to groups of parents.

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