Regional reports

Injuries are the third leading causes of death and disability in Malaysia. The annual incidence of road injuries per 100,000 population has increased from 16.9 in 1971 to 24.5 in 1993 and of these, motorcycle fatalities constituted 52%. In that year police data revealed that head and ‘multiple’ injuries were present in 39% and 50% respectively, of motorcycle fatalities. (‘Multiple injuries’ in this context probably include ‘head’ injuries.)

The study yielding these figures included two different parts: nature of helmet use and pattern of injuries among motorcycle fatalities. With the cooperation of the traffic police, we studied 1401 motorcyclists in an urban and a rural area. The type of helmet used, nature and looseness of strapping were observed. Consecutive motorcyclists were stopped by a police road block and examined by research assistants. Helmets were classified as full face, half face, or other and strap looseness was then determined. If two or more fingers could be admitted, it was considered too loose. Leaflets pertaining to correct helmet use were distributed after the evaluation. Motorcyclists were also checked for other traffic offences, for example possession of valid licence. Of the 1401 motorcyclists studied, only 30% of and 101 rural, helmets were strapped correctly in 53% and 60%, in the urban and rural areas respectively. One tenth did not strap their helmets at all, and 26 to 37%, strapped them incorrectly. Failure to wear a helmet was observed in the rural area but not in the urban area. Hence, in both areas combined only slightly more than half of motorcyclists were adequately protected by helmets.

The second part of the study ascertained the cause of death in 32 motorcycle fatalities. Postmortem studies in the Department of Pathology revealed that head injuries were the cause of death in 16. Police data in 1993 showed that 11.7% of fatalities (riders only) did not wear helmets. This could either mean that the victims truly did not wear helmets or that it dislodged upon impact because of loose strapping. This study concludes that a significant proportion of motorcyclists were unaware of the need to strap helmets and those in the rural area were less likely to wear them. This is significant because police data showed that only 39% of all motorcycle crashes occurred in the rural area, whereas victims from this area accounted for 64.4% of all fatalities. Accordingly, the fatality rate in the rural area was nearly twice that in the urban area. Lower need of travel, failure to wear helmets, improper wearing, or inaccessibility to medical care may be important contributing factors.

We concluded that motorcyclists in Malaysia need to be educated to wear helmets and to do so in the correct manner.

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The Child Accident Prevention Foundation of Southern Africa: newsletter from Cape Town, June 1995

As I write, the mind of the average South African is totally preoccupied with the forthcoming final play-off of the Rugby World Cup between South Africa and New Zealand. Rugby news covers the front pages of all daily newspapers and obscures many events and social issues which will be of consequence long after the sports stands have emptied and gone silent.

Two recent official pronouncements will unquestionably influence the future safety of South Africans, young and old alike; the first has been the decision by the Constitutional Court to abolish capital punishment. This brings South Africa in line with a prevailing first world trend, but arguably, removes an important deterrent in a country with the highest incidence of serious crime in the world! On the medical side, we have seen an alarming increase in the incidence of children’s injuries resulting both directly and indirectly from violent crime, while on the judicial side there is a marked softening of attitudes towards sentencing, terms of imprisonment, parole conditions, etc. The ‘system’ at present clearly favours the perpetrator and expects the victim to simply bite the bullet. What price human dignity? The second ruling of note has been the abolition of corporal punishment for criminal offences committed by children and adolescents, and most of us would I’m sure, support this move.

On a more familiar note, the battle against paraffin poisoning has been given a boost by a licensing of the ‘Argus Lok’ child-resistant closure for use in South Africa. At least one major oil company has decided to promote this device in its paraffin marketing campaigns.

Apart from Child Injury Prevention Week which falls in mid-August, CAPFSA will be formally restrained in its activities over the next six months due to the imminent arrival of firstborn children to both Nelmarie du Toit and Shehaam Hendricks, our two senior staff members.

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PS. Back to the rugby theme, the seminal between France and South Africa was a rain soaked affair, and certainly the first time I have heard of a vital match being called off due to risk of players drowning on the pitch!