REGIONAL REPORTS

South Africa

Are children always the victims of physical trauma? In South Africa and other parts of the continent, children themselves are being increasingly portrayed as perpetrators, responsible especially for injuries inflicted on their peers, but as aggressors against the adult population as well. British readers will not have forgotten the tragic murder of Jamie Bulger by two older children, and there have been subsequent less well publicised cases of children found guilty of homicide since then.

In Cape Town, two cases of fatal bullying in the schoolyard were recently reported. Countless numbers of foreign tourists visiting this otherwise beautiful city have been mugged, robbed, and terrified by the many gangs of street children who roam the business district at all times of the day. In Liberia and previously in Mozambique, young boys coopted to fight on either side of a conflict are portrayed as juvenile monsters capable of torturing, killing, and mutilating innocent people at the drop of a hat.

Few ordinary souls, who are confronted by the sensational images of children as criminals, are tempted to reject the cause of such distorted social development, nor do they have the insight necessary to do so. What is of even greater concern is that, on a continent where the distinction between good and evil is often blurred, such negative portrayal of children may prejudice any campaign for children's safety, simply because the population as a whole no longer automatically sees children as the victims of circumstance. Donors already weakened by 'compassion fatigue' may also become indifferent to the plight of children unless reminded that the vast majority of Africa's children have been handed a bad deal, but nevertheless do not prowl the streets attacking innocent natives. The Bantu proverb that a man's voice again leads the field, assisting local health workers to enrol and rehabilitate even the most battle hardened boy soldiers as well as other orphans of war. In South Africa social workers in the Cockburn Foundation have been exemplary in their commitment to sheltering and resocialising street children in the firm belief that most children will respond to kindness, discipline, and care if such is provided in a sympathetic and supportive environment.

The state of children in any region will accurately reflect the stability and social history as well as the economic state of the community populating that area. Malnutrition, disease, and ragged clothes are themselves alarming criteria of failing resources, but can at least be reversed by pragmatic health intervention or economic support or both. Gun toting adolescents and homeless street children are human by-products of a society where the most basic social structures are collapsing; the malaise they represent is cause for grave concern, and the cure required is a most complex one.

On a more positive note, the long neglected matter of bicycle safety is now being addressed. In South Africa the African Bureau of Standards (SABS) has proposed a list of compulsory specifications pertaining to the manufacture and sale of new bicycles. Until quite recently, bicycle injuries were not a common problem in South Africa, few parents being able to afford such a luxury for their children. However, political and economic reform has resulted in a rapidly blossoming 'consumer class' and bicycle sales are beginning to increase together with awareness of the importance of import controls could mean that the market will soon be flooded with a variety of bicycles, some safe, some not so safe. The specifications proposed by the SABS are by no means comprehensive and apply only to 'cycles intended for use on public roads', so kiddies' tricycles and smaller bicycles will remain unregulated. But, as I have said before in response to similar strategies, it's a start!

Lastly, may I wish all readers and their families a Merry Christmas and a happy, child safe new year.

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Australasia

New Zealand KidSafe Week 96

More than 45 communities across New Zealand marked KidSafe Week 96, New Zealand's first national child safety week (September 7–13), with events, displays, and promotions. Reena Khatkar, the KidSafe co-ordinator for the Wellington coordinator agency, Safekids, reports that this was a major first for New Zealand and struck a chord with communities throughout the country. Six national agencies, including the Accident Rehabilitation and Compensation Insurance Corporation, the Land Transport Safety Authority, New Zealand Police, New Zealand Fire Service, the Plunket Society (a child health agency) and the Office of the Commissioner for Children, were key partners in the development. Corporate support for the event has come from the week's founding sponsor Smith Kline Beecham (makers of Panadol) and supporting sponsor TV3. Forty eight volunteer community action groups took part in the nationwide event to raise awareness of unintentional injuries to children. The campaign focused on burns, and particularly burns in the home, the prevention of pedestrian injuries on the road and the prevention of trampoline injuries.

Schoolchildren bandaged 295 teddy bears representing the number of children hospitalised in New Zealand each week as a result of unintentional injury. Each bear, along with an advocacy package was then sent to key decision makers such as members of parliament and mayors.

New gun control laws in Australia

Agreement on national gun control is the leading item of injury news from Australia.

Following a conference in December in the State of Tasmania, a meeting of state police ministers and the Prime Minister in May agreed that there would be a total ban (on importation, ownership, sale, resale, manufacture, use, etc) of all automatic and semiautomatic rifles and shotguns. It was agreed that compensation would be paid for these firearms financed through a once-off increase in a national healthcare levy. A national approach to registration and licensing of firearms was also agreed to.

National Injury Surveillance Unit (NISU) analysis shows that in 1995 there were 52,000 deaths registered in Australia that were associated with firearms. This amounted to 7.3% of Australian injury deaths. On top of the deaths there were about 500 people admit-

Home made bomb recipes on Internet

A number of Australian youths have been severely injured in separate incidents involving home made bombs, made from simple household products and using 'recipes' found on the Internet.

In the latest incident a 17 year old Queenslands youth lost two fingers, the thumb, and the last joint of the other fingers on his left hand when a bomb he was making exploded prematurely. The youth said it was about his sixth bomb he had made since finding the recipe browsing on the Internet.

Eye injuries from elastic 'octopus' strips

A research report from the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital has highlighted the risk from domestic injuries from metal strips. Colloquially known as octopus strips these are commonly used on golfded, buggies, bike racks, and trailers to secure load.

A Perth youth died in July when the strap he was using to secure supermarket trolleys slipped or broke and the retracting end struck him in the throat. The report covered the 42 cases admitted to the hospital in four years and detailed loss of eyes, cataracts, retinal detachment, and glaucoma.

The most dangerous situation was found to be the use of the strips on roof racks of cars because the strap is then at eye height. Brandless strips using cheap metal and with no manufacturer identification were identified as particularly problematic.

New national injury council in Australia

The new Federal Government's election commitments included a proposal to establish a standing Ministerial Council on Injury Prevention reporting to the Minister for Health and Family Services. The objective of the council would be to obtain intersectoral cooperation and action to reduce injury. The injury community has welcomed the proposal for joint initiatives of development and desegregation across sectors. Injury is one of five national health priorities along with diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, cancer, and mental health.

Safe eating for young children

A group of organisations in South Australia lead by the Women's and Children's Hospital have developed a policy win-
NEWS FROM SAFETY PROGRAMMES

Editor’s note: this section includes a round-up of reports excerpted from newsletters and other publications from community groups and research units received since our last issue. Thanks to all who sent these reports. Please send me any similar material not covered in this or previous issues.

Child Safety Review (Child Accident Prevention Trust, UK)
A lead article in the summer 1996 issue of Child Safety Review describes the results of a survey of parents’ concerns. ‘Almost half worried more about accidents than any other health hazard’ confronting their children; although less than one fifth had had an accurate understanding of the magnitude of the risk. Importantly, a majority thought that more could be done to prevent accidents, including 90% who expected more of local councils, government, and television programmers.

Safety Canada
In a recent issue of this publication of the Canada Safety Council, the lead article focused on drunk drivers. It points out how ‘excruciatingly difficult’ it is to convict a person of impaired driving in Canada because of major loopholes in the law. Between 20 and 40% of impaired driving charges are dismissed or reduced because of these loopholes. The drinking and driving sections of the Criminal Code were tightened and severity of penalties increased in December 1985. A subsequent study showed a fall of 47% in the rate of persons charged with impaired driving. The study concluded that the law may have failed because the public was not aware of it; it was not fully implemented; it had unexpected countervailing effects; or that the amendments related to severity of sanctions, ‘not to the certainty and swiftness of their application’.

Injury Prevention Research Unit (New Zealand)
In case anyone is confused, the answer is ‘yes’ — a small country like New Zealand does have not one, but two outstanding injury prevention research groups (with almost identical names!). This one, the unit based at the University of Otago under the leadership of John Langley and David Chalmers, has an equally awesome annual report for 1995. It continues to be supported severely by the Accident Rehabilitation and Compensation Insurance Corporation and the Health Research Council and has been approved for a further three years. Of note is the fact that the report includes 35 papers published in peer-reviewed journals. Much effort also goes into the production of fact sheets and its new home page on the WWW. Highlights include: the Christchurch Retail Shop Survey (published in Injury Prevention, 1996; 2: 41–3) work on the graduated licensing system, motorcycle injuries, a major study on rugby injuries, playground safety, trampoline and other sports injuries, farm injuries, a focus on international injury, firearms, and injury surveillance. (Further details: IPRU, University of Otago, PO Box 913, Dunedin, New Zealand.)

SAFE KIDS Canada
This programme recently persuaded Homemaker’s Magazine, with its huge readership, to include a section prepared entirely by staff member Jane Rogers. The section, ‘SAFE Kids are no accident: 40 ways to keep your kids safe this summer’ was published under Rogers’ byline, and included a description of SAFE KIDS, alongside tips about car, bicycle, playground safety, and scald prevention.

‘Think, think again’
This is the catchy slogan being used by SAFE KIDS in Edmonton (Alberta) as part of their campaign to improve child seat restraint use. The full slogan is ‘THINK the kids are buckled up right? THINK AGAIN’ (see poster). The project is a combination of education and enforcement, based on a zero tolerance philosophy. Drivers receive a ticket for each child not correctly restrained. Among the options for ticketed drivers is a 45 minute educational session at the local health unit (Joanne Vincenten, Director, SAFE KIDS, Edmonton).