South Africa

More on gun control

As happened in the countries of the ex-Soviet Union, it was inevitable that a sudden liberalisation of law and order in South Africa would create an ideal culture medium for the social plagues that threaten the lives of ordinary citizens—namely violent crime, drug abuse, and fraud. One of the most urgent problems impacting upon children is the unchecked ownership of firearms in South African cities—most of these being acquired illegally and very cheaply too. Military weapons stockpiled during the civil wars that previously raged in Angola and Mozambique are now smuggled into South Africa where an unused Kalashnikov automatic rifle may be bought on the ‘informal’ market for as little as R50 ($11.00), and handguns for much less.

Recently, the Minister for Safety and Security appointed a parliamentary committee to develop new policy for the control of legal firearms (while the battle against illegal weapons has been delegated to South Africa’s rather stressed out police service). The Parliamentary Committee’s recommendations thus far are all encompassing, including a full review of licensing procedures, decentralisation of firearm registers, creation of a firearm injury database, and a voluntary firearm surrender programme. It just might be that these recommendations are intended to be implemented in South Africa dependent as they would be on the integrity of police and legal infrastructures—all a bit shaky at present. Another factor which will likely colour this process is the emergence of gun control lobby groups in South Africa—not yet as galvanised as in the US, but likely to become so if and when the debate on firearm policy goes public. However, this process develops, much credit must go to non-governmental organisation ‘Gun Free South Africa’ for its furious, incessant lobbying in and outside the corridors of power over the last 18 months. Contact gunfree@wn.apc.org.

Injury and Violence Control Network

The South African Injury and Violence Control Network (SAIVCN) was set up in March to:

- Promote the development of specialist skills in the field of injury and violence prevention through regular training courses
- Act as an advocacy body lobbying for resources and policy support
- Develop a register of individuals, agencies, and funders who operate in the area of intentional injuries
- Facilitate project based collaboration at the levels of research, direct service and public health education

Booze bus and Australian road safety videos

Lastly, some interesting road safety initiatives bear mentioning. Jan Sheld kindled sent me an Australian government initiative for announcing the sale of a heavy duty ‘Booze bus’ to the KwaZulu-Natal provincial government. Acquisitio of this all purpose safety, enforcement, and alcohol detection vehicle is one arm of the province’s road safety strategy developed in conjunction with the national Department of Transport. Unfortunately, 26 Australian road safety videos well known in the State of Victoria and featuring spine chilling images of accident victims have not made it on to our TV screens despite having been donated free of charge more than two years ago. No reasons for these have been offered in spite of repeated calls for road safety organisations and can test these out for five minutes on SATV.

Another strategy being considered is the staggering of school summer vacation dates in order to decrease traffic density during the Christmas holidays. Predictably, stakeholders in the hospitality industry have slammed the idea on the grounds that hotel accommodation packages, cinema programmes, and airline tariffs would be thrown into disarray. Clearly, we have a long way to go to the tragic wastage of 10 000 road traffic deaths which occur annually in South Africa.

Australasia

Fencing domestic swimming pools—New Zealand and Australia

Drowning in domestic swimming pools has a significant cause of death in Australia and New Zealand across two decades. Though at risk are toddlers aged 2, 3, and 4 old enough to escape immediate adult supervision. Drowning is the single largest cause of death in Australian children of these ages and in one of the worst areas pool drowning and near-drowning rate ran at 70.2 per 100 000 children at risk. In New Zealand, the national pool drowning rate peaked (in 1981) at 6.8 per 100 000 children under 5. Because the need for change in the fencing of pools became a public issue once children were drowning in significant numbers, intervention needed to cover two areas: pool fence and fencing policy. The approach in both countries has been to use both building codes and specific legislation to set minimum requirements for fencing. Requirements in the build code operate on construction permits and are enforced at the time and substantially altered pools. Such codes cannot, however, deal with existing pools and so legislation is required by the appropriate authority to affect the requirements for them. Australia has an additional concern that it is a federated system and regulation is
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

THINK FIRST program

EDITOR,—In your June 1997 issue, a notice was published announcing the expansion of the THINK FIRST program to Mexico and Russia (p 83). You included an editorial comment citing a 1995 study which questioned the efficacy of the THINK FIRST high school program,1 and implied that the expansion was ill advised in light of that report.

It is important to note that the paper you cited being as critical of THINK FIRST as it actually was initiated through our own Founda-
tion. Our Board of Directors realized, early on, that it was important to evaluate this program objectively in order to make modifications that would improve THINK FIRST's effectiveness, based in large part on the information gleaned from this and other studies.2

Most significant was our shift in emphasis from the high school students to elementary grade children. In 1996, we premiered the THINK FIRST FOR Kids program which is directed towards first, second, and third graders. The program is delivered over six weeks and encompasses basic anatomy, as well as prevention strategies in five distinct areas including: vehicular safety, water safety, sports and recreation safety, bicycle safety, and violence (weapons avoidance and conflict resolution). The program imparts multimedia presentation using animated videos, classroom posters, color and black and white comics, an extensive curriculum manual for teachers with reproducible worksheets, and an online THINK FIRST web site (www.thinkfirst.org). Extensive reinforcement activities throughout the community are also included.

In response to the findings of the efficacy studies, on the teen program, we developed new videos, modified the existing presentation, moved toward a more intimate classroom format, rather than large assemblies, and included innovative year long reinforcement activities. Efficacy studies are currently underway to gauge the effects of these modifications, as well as to evaluate the new THINK FIRST FOR Kids program.

Few, if any, programs associated with injury prevention, have received such a high level of scrutiny and concern with efficacy as THINK FIRST. This no doubt reflects the fact that the foundation was created by organized medicine, and that surgeons on its board of directors. With our collective scientific background, we feel compelled to continue to prove that we are doing works.

It seems only fair that the THINK FIRST Foundation should be lauded for its commitment to efficacy and its willingness to modify its approach, rather than be derided on the basis of a single paper published in your journal in the past. Our mission is to prevent injuries and, thus, save lives, and we will continue to pursue that goal undaunted.


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in the hands of each state and territory. To date only Queensland and Victoria have enacted provisions that address all pools. Both states introduced regulation for existing pools and lesser requirements for existing pools with time to comply. In both countries, local councils or authorities are the bodies responsible for practical implementation of the code and any laws through the building approval and inspection processes.

The general approach under building codes is to stipulate performance requirements and the form of words is: 'barriers to restrict access of young children to the pool and the immediate pool area'. What constitutes such barriers can be clarified by reference to standards or guidelines issued by relevant government departments. In New Zealand such barriers are restricted children under 6, in Australia it is children under 5.

How well are these requirements working? The Injury Prevention Research Unit was recently commissioned by the New Zealand Water Safety Council to undertake a survey to check on the current state of compliance and enforcement of the pool fencing requirements. A postal survey was responded to by 60 out of 74 territorial authorities and follow up interviews were conducted with 12. Around half (46%) of the pools identified by the authorities were known to comply, 18% were known not to comply, and the status of the rest (36%) was unknown. Few authorities had procedures for locating and inspecting pools, apart from the building permit process. Two thirds did not have reinspection programs to ensure on going compliance.

In New Zealand, according to the New Zealand Water Safety Council figures, pool drowning of children under 5 averaged eight per year before the Swimming Pools Act was introduced and four per year in the period since its introduction. The Australian State of Queensland was the first jurisdiction to require fencing of all pools; existing pools were subject to lower requirements and an extended period within which to comply. There was a substantial fall in the number of child drownings in pools around the time existing pools were required to be fenced. In absolute terms the number of deaths fell from around 13 per year before the legislation (1991) to one in the first year after full compliance was required. Initially this was regarded as evidence of both compliance and effectiveness but subsequent increases in the number of deaths (to around five per year) has resulted in some rethinking. The debate over the introduction of fencing regulations was acrimonious and inescapable and undoubtedly had an educative effect which has reduced over time. The degree of compliance with the legislation is being investigated.

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Further reading
Pitt W, Balandra K. Childhood drowning and near-