

National Public Health Week: focus on injury prevention

More than 20 years ago, the Institute of Medicine called injury 'probably the most underrecognized major public health problem facing the nation today.'¹ Despite the ongoing commitment of governmental and non-governmental organisations to prevent and reduce the burden of injury in the USA, injuries remain the leading cause of death for children and adults between the ages of 1 and 44 years.² In 2009, hospital emergency departments across the nation treated an average of 55 people every minute for medical problems sustained from injury.² More than 180 000 Americans died from injury in 2007; the number and age-adjusted rate of death has steadily increased since 2000.² Millions more are left facing substantial and lifelong physical, emotional, and economic consequences. As with many public health problems, there are notable disparities in the incidence of injury and violence and the ultimate health outcomes among poor children, minorities and those living in rural communities and low-income inner city neighbourhoods. Moreover, with medical care costs of US\$72 billion in a single year, injury is among the most expensive medical problems in the USA, second only to heart conditions at US\$76 billion.³ In a single year, US \$80 billion will be generated in lifetime costs for medical care and another \$326 billion for lost productivity.⁴

For these reasons, this year's National Public Health Week (NPHW) is devoted to the prevention of injury across the nation. This national campaign, scheduled for the first full week of April, is dedicated to educating the public, policy-makers, health practitioners, and community organisations about the magnitude and severity of injury, and guiding them towards evidence-based solutions to prevent and reduce this growing and tragic public health burden. It is quite appropriate that, this year, NPHW coincides with the National Injury Conference, 'Progress through Partnerships,' co-sponsored by SAVIR, the Safe States Alliance and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Unintentional and violent injuries continue to eat away at the economic and social fabric of our society. Collectively, we question whether the driver next to us is texting or otherwise distracted while driving; whether our parents will be counted among the thousands of older adults who have a traumatic brain injury from a preventable fall; or if it will be our teenagers who are among the 3,000 teen deaths or the 350,000 emergency department visits each year resulting from motor vehicle crashes.

The recent carnage in Tuscon, Arizona, where 20 persons were shot, six of them fatally, reminds us once again of the terrible toll that violence costs our nation. This is the latest event in a long series of preventable tragedies that demand action. Many injured individuals survived, but would not have, if there had not been rapid responses by bystanders and more importantly, the availability of a highly effective trauma system in that community. It has been shown that the overall risk of death among severely injured patients is 25% lower when care is received in a level 1 trauma centre versus a non-trauma centre hospital.⁵

Thanks to advances in research and practice in injury prevention, often conducted on the most modest of budgets and without much fanfare, we have learnt a lot about how to prevent injury. In fact, motor vehicle safety and occupational safety were highlighted as two of the greatest accomplishments

in public health in the last century.⁶ The evidence supports the effectiveness of such life-saving products as smoke alarms, bicycle helmets, seat belts and car seats, among many others. Policies such as graduated driver licensing and programmes that address older adult falls are but two examples of effective approaches to preventing injury.^{7 8} The challenge ahead is to ensure that what is known about prevention is put into practice equitably and on a broad scale to reduce the injury burden and disparities in this country. Adequate support for research and practice is critical to achieving this goal.

Committed to research and the translation of that research into practice, the injury prevention community continues to develop and test a wide range of multidisciplinary, multisectorial strategies that positively impact environmental and product design, human behaviour, and policy-making to reduce injury and its consequences. More resources commensurate with the total societal burden are needed for routine surveillance, to support and disseminate prevention research, enhance training in injury prevention, and to improve trauma systems and outcomes. As our nation desperately searches for ways to improve the nation's health and reduce healthcare costs, we must speak up. Help ensure that all policymakers, health practitioners, the media and the general public understand that they can make a difference in preventing injury and seek their commitment to act on it.

Please join us during NPHW to educate, advocate and act for change. Some things are just true... 'Safety Is No Accident.' Prevention works!

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