EDITORIAL

Protecting children from dangerous products: fundamental change needed

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This summer many parents in North America (and perhaps elsewhere as well) experienced considerable anxiety when they learned that certain children's toys were unsafe. Problems with lead paint and with potentially detachable components that could lead to choking had been identified. Most of these products had apparently been imported from China. Mattel, one of the largest toymakers and distributors, recalled hundreds of these toys, and Walmart, one of the largest retailers in the world, offered to reimburse parents if the product was returned.

In the USA the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) is responsible for protecting the public from "unreasonable risks of serious injury or death from more than 15,000 types of consumer products". Its main approach to doing so is to issue recalls or recall alerts and to announce these both in the media and on

its website.¹ A similar, passive approach is used in Canada.

The problem with this "strategy" is that it places the lion's share of responsibility on the shoulders of parents. A study addressing this problem has recently appeared in the *Canadian Journal of Public Health*.² I was the lead author of what was, in effect, a randomised trial to determine if parents can be adequately informed about hazardous products through posters in doctor's offices, the media or the Internet. The simple answer seems to be that none of these means is effective.

For example, the CSPC website states: "You can find information on over 4,000 product recalls and recall alerts using the various searches on this page." No doubt "you" can if you know all about RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds and have the skill and patience to navigate all the links. For me, it would be difficult, to

say the least. And the news media, having frightened parents about the possible dangers, invariably point to the websites for details about any specific product. My conclusion is that the passive approach is wrong; it has been shown to be ineffective scientifically and it is morally offensive.

Instead, as we argue in our paper,² what is needed is for agencies such as the CPSC to adopt the precautionary principle so that the burden is on the manufacturer and distributor to ensure that what is being sent to the marketplace is safe. This is what we expect of pharmaceuticals and we should expect no less for toys. Indeed, this principle should be the bedrock of most injury prevention efforts. The principle represents a fundamental change in our thinking, and needs to be better understood and seriously considered in our search for solutions.

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