

# We all play a role in keeping children safe

**T**ODAY marks the official start of Child Protection Week countrywide. The campaign started in 1997; yet large numbers of South Africa's children continue to experience violence in their homes and communities daily.

Alarming, violence is not decreasing. Children are dying at the hands of those meant to care for and protect them, and children continue to die from preventable causes.

To stop preventable deaths, we need a better understanding of how and why children are dying. Once we know that, we can identify potential strategies to prevent future deaths, and that can help to strengthen our health and child protection system to reduce child deaths.

To contribute to this goal, a child death review pilot project was implemented a year ago to investigate the deaths of children at two pilot sites, in KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape.

In KwaZulu-Natal, all child deaths recorded at Phoenix mortuary, north

of Durban, were reviewed every month by a child deaths review team made up of staff of the Children's Institute and the Division of Forensic Medicine, both at the University of Cape Town, the KZN Departments of Health and Social Development, the KZN Police Service, Childline South Africa and Child Welfare.

During this pilot phase (January to December last year) we saw almost one child death every second day at the mortuary.

Of concern, we found the leading causes of death for children under 18 were road traffic injuries, homicide, suicide and electrocution. Sadly, these are all injury deaths that are preventable; so children should not be dying from them.

Child Protection Week aims to create safe and secure environments, and we can learn a lot about barriers to this goal by reviewing child deaths, as we have done at Phoenix mortuary.

There we found that, in a relatively small district, 30 children were killed in one year in the context of child



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abuse and neglect. Most of these deaths occurred within the confines of the home or at the hands of someone close to them, some soon after birth.

This is a tragedy. Although child abuse and death are not the result of a single factor, but due to a combination of factors, there are often warning signs when a family is in distress.

But services are often not responsive to the needs of such families or individuals – with devastating consequences.

We also found a disproportionate number of young children, two as

young as nine, who committed suicide. In these cases both the families and schools reported that they were not aware that these children were in emotional turmoil.

The young age of these children raises concern and poses challenges to those who provide services to children. It is clear that children do not feel free to talk about their concerns to those closest to them, who should be responsive to both their physical and emotional needs.

To reduce the kinds of preventable deaths reviewed in Phoenix, community-based services should be reaching out to families and caregivers in crisis and educating them on signs of depression and distress.

The disproportionate number of electrocution deaths found by the review is shameful.

These are all due to illegal connections in informal communities where basic services such as electricity are not a priority, unaffordable, or where there is resistance to paying for services.

It is critical that local authorities take heed of the dire consequences of such illegal connections as these deaths of young children should not have happened.

Communities should also be made aware of the fatal consequences of illegal connections and their role in stopping this practice.

The theme for Child Protection Week this year is “working together to protect children”. The research has alerted the child protection community of the need to work harder and more consistently towards the prevention of child deaths and violence against children.

However child protection is everyone's business. It's important for the government and communities to join forces to make communities safer spaces for all children.

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