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Leading cause of children deaths through injury is preventable – UCT academic

Prevention of high levels of childhood injury in South Africa crucial

The leading cause of death for children between the ages 12 months and 18 years old is injury, and most of it is preventable. This is according to University of Cape Town's (UCT) Professor Sebastian van As, head of the Red Cross Children's Hospital Trauma Unit.

It comes as no surprise since the Red Cross Children's hospital treats 10 000 injured children every year. The main causes of childhood injury in South Africa are road traffic crashes, drowning, burns, and in some areas, firearm injuries. Professor Van As explains: "That's around 200 injured children each week. In a country like South Africa, which is now home to 20 million children, that is a staggering number of injuries."

"Traditionally, hospitals focus on the treatment and rehabilitation of injuries, or the cure," says Professor Van As. "But when it comes to children, the prevention of injury is an ethical imperative."

Professor Van As is also chair of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) ChildSafe which runs education and advocacy programmes, underpinned by research, that focus on the main causes of childhood injury in South Africa.

One of the projects close to Professor Van As's heart is the taxi safety project. It is a well-established fact that children are more likely to be involved in a road crash on their way to or from school than at any other time. "Taxi drivers have a terrible reputation in South Africa," he explains. "But in 2013, we set about trying to establish a safer travel culture for school children."

The project invites taxi drivers to participate in safe driving training and installs a tracking device in their vehicles. ChildSafe is then able to monitor everything from speed to sudden braking and other behaviour to ensure the safety of the children being transported. Safe drivers receive rewards such as funds for petrol and even a new vehicle. "Many of the almost 1 000 drivers who have been involved in the programme have reported back to us saying that they are proud to be keeping the children in the community safe."

The commemoration of Child Protection Week (3-7 June) befittingly comes as Professor Van As has been announced as the 2018 Alan Pifer Research Award recipient for the important research he has conducted over the past 20 years into child safety in South Africa. Awarded annually by UCT Vice-Chancellor Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng, the award recognises outstanding welfare-related research that benefits South Africa's disadvantaged people.

Child Protection Week is observed in the country annually to raise awareness on the rights of children as articulated in the Constitution and to ensure the mobilisation of all sectors of society to care for and protect children.

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