

MD's Word or Two

By Patrick Kulati

Injury Prevention Should Be a National Priority

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Introduction

Casey Marengi is a young woman from Kenya. At a very young age of 20, Casey was paralysed from the shoulders down. She was unfortunately mowed down by a drunk driver as she drove with friends in Nairobi, Kenya. As a quadriplegic she cannot walk, turn a page or do normal things. Yet she is bright, beautiful and articulate. She runs her NGO, Chariots of Destiny, and travels the world as a champion of road safety.

I met Casey in October during a presentation she made on road safety at the Safe Kids Conference which was held in Washington DC last month. We were all moved and touched as she clearly elucidated her experience and how she survived the tragic accident. Casey is just one of millions of people, particularly children, who are injured or killed every day in avoidable accidents. These are accidents that could be avoided if all citizens, governments and businesses prioritised safety on our roads and homes.

Unnecessary deaths due to lack of injury prevention

Last week the Medical Research Council (MRC) issued its 9th Annual Report of the National Injury Mortality Surveillance System, entitled *A Profile of Fatal Injuries in South Africa*. The report *'identified fatal injuries, especially as the consequence of motor vehicle collisions and violence as top South African public health priorities...'* It continues to say that *'most prominent external causes of death among other age groups include burns for infants and children younger than 5 years...'* A press statement about the report states that *"Violence and motor vehicle accidents continue to be major causes of death in South Africa. In spite of the magnitude of these twinned problems, the situation of death as a result of preventable causes continues to be a cause for concern for any person or organisation interested in the health and social well-being of the population."*

http://www.mrc.ac.za/pressreleases/2008/9thannrpt_nimss.htm

I had a cursory look at some previous NIMMS reports, and it seems that the situation is not getting better. It's actually getting worse. We are increasingly becoming a dangerous society, not in terms of crime, but in terms of preventable injuries. The financial burden of these injuries to our health system and national budget is too heavy to accurately quantify. These divert resources away from legitimate problems.

Are we a careless and reckless society?

This paints a picture of our society as a careless and reckless and it raises serious concerns about us as community members, businesses and government. As a country, our attitude towards preventative safety consciousness is appalling. For example, just this morning I heard a story about an unlicensed driver who was caught driving an unroad-worthy and overloaded vehicle transporting school children. This criminal was charged a pathetic R2500. Apparently our laws do not require that this person be locked. So now he is roaming our streets free to break the law again. Unsafe paraffin appliances continue to flood the South African markets through our borders, putting in danger lives of millions of poor people.

Let's learn from other countries

Our attitude seems to be far different from other countries. For example, at the Safe Kids Conference in Washington DC, United States and also at Safe Communities Conference in Christchurch, New

Zealand, I was astounded at the seriousness by which politicians there took this matter. They spoke about bills that they initiated and how they were ensuring enforcement. We heard about government-led and business -supported programmes which were being successfully implemented.

Granted, these are developed countries, but the populations of developing countries have an equal right to safe existence. We look to our governments to develop regulations and laws premised on safety and ensure enforcement thereof. We look to them to pour more resources on this issue. Our children look up to us as adults to ensure their safety from harm. This includes safety from household energy related injuries such as burns, asphyxiation and paraffin ingestions.

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So this raises important questions to our policy makers, politicians and communities: What are we doing to reduce injuries among South Africans? To what extent are the current policies, regulations and behaviours preventative, monitored and implemented to prevent injuries? To what extent are we enforcing preventative laws and regulations? The NIMMS report statistics and Casey's experiences should serve as a clarion for governments particularly in Africa to prioritise the safety of their citizens. By this I mean put in place prevention policies, effectively implement those, more qualified people and more money on safety promotion. This is extremely important.

The safety of people, particularly children in their homes, should increasingly become a critical factor in elections. As citizens we should require that political parties state clearly what they will do to ensure the safety of people, especially in their household energy use. With our national elections looming in a few months time, it is time for political parties across the board to focus on this matter of injury prevention.

Casey Marengi is busy in Kenya and around the world engaging political and other decision makers to put in place to prevent injuries. Let her work be not in vain. No one should ever be injured from preventable causes.