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In view of the alarming number of paraffin-related injuries and deaths, David C. Schwebel, Ph.D., of the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) and Dehran Swart, MPH., of the Paraffin Safety Association of Southern Africa (PSA) initiated a collaborative, trans-Atlantic research project. Funded by a UAB Sparkman Global Health Research Grant, the project seeks to answer the question: Are current PSA educational materials effective in improving paraffin safety knowledge and practice in low-income communities?

The research team randomly chose Du Noon as the intervention site and Phillipi as the control or comparison site. Through working with the local community structures, 120 households in each informal settlement were selected to take part in the study. Phumla Hobe, Project Coordinator for PSA, five local Xhosa-speaking research assistants, and two American students traveled to the communities daily to interview family members and assess their current paraffin safety knowledge and practice.

Recently, twenty community volunteers in Du Noon attended a two-day workshop on paraffin safety where Master Trainer, Ms. Noelene Nkondlwana, guided them through a series of posters detailing on how best to prevent and respond to paraffin-related injuries. Armed with knowledge, skills, and educational materials, the volunteers have begun educating members of the selected households in their community. Using a “train-the-trainer” approach, the researchers expect that the volunteers will quickly and efficiently disseminate potentially life-saving knowledge in the community. In the coming weeks, the research team will re-visit each home to measure any changes in paraffin safety knowledge and practice.

Phillipi serves as the control or comparison community. As in Du Noon, trained volunteers will also educate community members, however, the training and community education will take place at the end of the project. If the educational materials are effective, then we expect to see a difference in the safety practices between the two communities.

The project is scheduled for completion in September 2007. It is hoped that the training materials will be proven to be effective so that they can be used with assurance in other similar communities.

Every paraffin-related fire, poisoning, and burn is preventable. UAB and PSA intend to use valuable data emerging from this study to secure resources for future collaborative projects in order to improve safety in low income communities.