

Product safety a life-saving role



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Many people are unaware of the potential for injury or death created by unsafe consumer products.

Sadly, however, babies have strangled after becoming entangled in loose blind-cords or suffocated after being trapped in gaps caused by ill-fitting cot mattresses.

And it is not just young children at risk—people of all ages can be endangered by unsafe consumer products or failing to use products appropriately. For example, each year many Australians suffer serious injuries falling from ladders, and 30 people have died since 2000 after the vehicles they were working under collapsed because of unstable or inappropriately used vehicle jacks.

So what role does the ACCC play in preventing such injuries?

Rather than attempting to regulate every product in the marketplace, the staff of the ACCC's Product Safety Division monitor evidence of any consumer product that could, or has, caused serious injury or death.

A consumer product could have physical shortcomings—its design, the way it was made and the way it works—that makes it unsafe, or the risk might be caused by the way consumers behave when they use it.

When evidence exists that a product is clearly dangerous and should not be made or supplied, we recommend that it be banned.

Examples of banned products include a children's dart-gun set with small suction-tipped darts that are a choking hazard, and toothpaste that contains unacceptable levels of diethylene glycol, an industrial solvent also used in anti-freeze.

An 18-month interim ban is sometimes used during investigations, as in the well known Bindeez case, where bead toys containing 1,4-butanediol caused serious illness when swallowed.

Investigations into unsafe products may include highly technical testing carried out by specialists, the study of coronial and hospital emergency data, and consultations with standards-making bodies, industry representatives, consumer groups and government regulators across Australia and overseas.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission is an independent statutory authority formed in 1995 to administer the Trade Practices Act. Our 'Inside the ACCC' series takes you inside the commission. In the first article, we look at the Product Safety Division.

Sometimes these investigations result in a mandatory product safety standard that specifies particular safety features and/or warnings required before suppliers can make, import, sell or hire the product in Australia.

Education and media campaigns are run to alert consumers to the possible risk and to inform businesses of their obligations. ACCC staff around Australia conduct regular market surveillance to check that suppliers obey laws, often in collaboration with state and territory agencies.

Businesses that fail to comply with a product safety standard may negotiate a voluntary recall or risk further court action, or the ACCC may seek financial penalties or prosecution.

Because new products are always appearing in the marketplace, it is vital that consumers keep telling the ACCC of any near-misses, injuries or illnesses they suffer when using products. While you may see an incident as a one-off or a mistake, your report could help the ACCC identify a wider community problem that requires investigation.

For more information, visit www.accc.gov.au or call the ACCC Infocentre on 1300 302 502. To find out about product recalls, visit www.recalls.gov.au.