

Accidents a major child killer in Asia

Over 30,000 Vietnamese children die each year from preventable accidents such as drowning, road accidents and poisoning.

Compare this with Australia, where some 250 children die every year from injury.

Ninety-eight per cent of all child injuries occur in the developing world, according to agencies like the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef).

Yet from Dhaka to Da Nang, investment in measures to try and prevent such incidents – usually labelled and accepted as “accidents” – is tiny compared to the millions spent on health.

Professor Chitr Sittiamorn, former dean of Chulalongkorn University's College of Public Health, said it is ironic that in Thailand, 82 per cent of children who died of preventable incidents had been immunised under various health schemes.

A noted epidemiologist and public health expert, he is the principal author of *Child Injury In Thailand*, a report based on The National Injury Survey, the country's largest ever survey of death and disability.

The National Injury Survey mirrors an identical survey in Bangladesh and was supported by Unicef, Thailand's Ministry of Public Health and the non-governmental organisation The Alliance for Safe Children (TASC).

TASC's founder, former US ambassador to Vietnam Douglas Peterson, has been lobbying governments in the region to shift gears.

“Almost all Western countries have preventive programmes, but not so in Asia and the developing world,” he says.

“Child injury is an orphan issue, it's something few people do anything about. It has always been there, but it's been masked by the huge infectious diseases problem.”

The child injury phenomenon reflects the socio-economic realities of much of rural, developing Asia.

A lot of the time, children supervise other children in an environment of poor or non-existent infrastructure with little community knowledge of day-to-day safety issues.

In Thailand, only 14 per cent



PHOTO: EPA

LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP: More children in developing Asia die from preventable causes such as drowning than communicable diseases, yet far less is invested in preventing these than on health.

A PROBLEM OVERSHADOWED

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of the children who drowned knew how to swim. In Bangladesh, about two-thirds of drowning cases involve children either alone or accompanied by another child incapable of rescuing them.

It does not take much to fix this, says Mr Peterson.

In Bangladesh, crèches supervised by a mother have been introduced for poor communities with working mothers.

NGOs like TASC have be-

gun schemes in which an area in the village pond is fenced off with bamboo poles to create a controlled area, and lifeguards and swimming instructors are brought to the community to give toddlers swimming lessons.

TASC plans to replicate this in Da Nang in Vietnam.

Thailand's Ministry of Public Health, using schools as entry points to communities, now aims to teach every

child to swim.

Programmes teaching awareness on safety issues – and simple infrastructure like safety rails in dangerous areas – can be undertaken at minimal cost, says Mr Peterson.

“If NGOs are talking to a large number of mothers about HIV/Aids, why not talk to them about injury prevention as well?” he suggests.

“Governments need to transition from programmes on infectious diseases to preventable injuries. So far the data has not been there; now it is available, and policy-makers must react.”

Prof Chitr says that in tracking national socio-economic statistics, people of working age are given higher weightage and value.

“But if you really want to have respect for human life you need to change this way of measuring and analysis,” he says.

“What is most important is to deal head-on with the misconception that these are accidents... they are preventable.”

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Preventable accidents a major child killer in Asia



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IN BANGKOK

ON A recent Sunday afternoon in a sleepy village in the northern Thai province of Phitsanulok, a group of bright-eyed girls gathered to play near a pond in the rice fields.

Laughing and squealing as 10-year-olds do, they began a game to see how far they could walk backwards into the water before losing their nerve.

Three girls – Sunisa, Chalinee and Supawadee – lost their footing and, unable to swim, struggled in the murky brown water of the 3m-deep pond.

Their horrified friends ran for help. Several adults arrived at the scene, but the three girls were nowhere in sight.

Sunisa and Chalinee, who had clung to each other in terror, were found deep in the pond, dead in each other's arms. Supawadee's lifeless body was found a short distance from them.

In Thailand, drowning is one of the two leading causes of death among young children, with the other being road accidents. Every day, seven children drown and seven more die on the roads.

In all, more than 16 children aged one to 17 die of preventable injuries every day in Thailand – more than those killed by all infectious diseases combined.

In flood-prone Bangladesh, with its numerous bodies of water, drowning takes the lives of around 46 children every day – more than traditional killers diarrhoea and pneumonia. Many cases go unreported.

In Vietnam, drowning kills nearly six times as many children as communicable diseases.