

A fence around every swimming pool would help prevent deaths

Debbie Friedman

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Regardless of age or skill level, no one is drown-proof. Each year in Canada approximately 60 children aged 14 and under drown, while another 140 are hospitalized for near-drowning events. Quebec has already seen 40 drownings this year, and the summer has just begun.

What does this tell us? More importantly, how can we reverse this disturbing trend?

As director of trauma and director of the Canadian Hospitals Injury Prevention and Reporting Program at the Montreal Children's Hospital, I believe the answer lies in the promotion of more concurrent initiatives to prevent trauma-related injuries such as drowning.

I strongly support the Quebec government's Residential Swimming Pool Safety Law unveiled in 2010. This law includes mandatory fencing around pools installed after July 22, 2010. However, I fail to comprehend why all municipalities do not have bylaws that would require all backyard swimming pools – not just newly installed ones – to be surrounded by four-sided fencing at least four feet in height, with automatic locking gates and no opening below the fence. The risk of drowning is the same in a pool built prior to 2010 as in those built after 2010.

Since 2008, five coroners investigating drowning deaths have recommended that the province's ministry of education roll out a Swim to Survive program to promote basic swimming skills to school-aged children. Two of those recommendations came in the past year when seven children aged 5 to 18 drowned in Quebec's rivers and swimming pools. This week the government finally vowed to implement this life-saving program for Quebec children in Grade 3. I commend this plan and certainly support it. But what about the children who never make it to Grade 3?

According to Safe Kids Canada (safekidscanada.ca), a national injury-prevention program, the majority of drowning deaths among young children involve those under the age of 5. Many of these tragic deaths take place in backyard swimming pools.

Young children are curious. They do not recognize the potential for danger. And they are impulsive. A warm summer day around a pool is great family fun but vigilant supervision at all times, with all eyes on the water, is essential. A young child can quickly panic and drown.

Over the past few weeks, the Montreal Children's Hospital trauma centre has treated several children under the age of 5 who have drowned in above-ground or in-ground backyard swimming pools. The new swimming program would have done little to prevent these deaths.

The World Health Organization recommends that prevention strategies should be developed using a combination of educational initiatives, environmental measures, engineering modifications and, yes, in some cases, enforcement and legislation. Successful life-saving and injury-prevention ventures often require concurrent initiatives, none of which are mutually exclusive. The bottom line is that the aforementioned strategies are all needed, and they are needed now. Debbie Friedman is trauma director of the Montreal Children's Hospital and an assistant professor in the Department of Pediatrics at the McGill University Faculty of Medicine.

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