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Quebec health officials urge pool gates after spate of toddler drownings

By LES PERREAUX

Barriers for all backyard pools must be made mandatory , health officials say after seven drownings in three weeks

Quebec is in the midst of an epidemic of toddler drownings, and the provincial government must act quickly to require fences and automatic gates for all backyard pools, health officials say.

Experts in public health and childhood trauma said on Friday that a spate of seven drownings in three weeks among preschoolers requires the same level of action as an outbreak of a deadly disease.

"If this many children were dying from meningitis, we would have a full-scale vaccination campaign. It's a Quebec drowning epidemic," said Debbie Friedman, trauma director at the Montreal Children's Hospital. "We use the word 'accident' to quickly discount these things. It implies this is an act of fate, when in fact the vast majority of child drownings are completely preventable. People need to get that through their head."

Two children aged 2 died within hours in family pools on Thursday, a one-day death toll for young children greater than in each of the previous three years in Quebec.

The province is among the largest markets for pools in North America. About 220,000 of its more than 300,000 pools are above-ground. The ubiquity of pools and an early summer heat wave are contributing to the outbreak, safety advocates say.

A particular pool setup has proven especially deadly. Many homeowners like to build a deck directly off the back of their houses to the edge of a pool, meaning children who barely walk don't even have to negotiate a step to get to the water's edge – unless access is blocked with a gate.

Quebec already has one of the few provincial laws requiring pools to have fences and locked gates, but only for those installed since 2010.

"Children drown in old pools just like new ones. I'm calling on the province to examine the logic of demanding gates on new pools and not old pools. It defies logic," Ms. Friedman said.

The province is examining the situation, according to Joanie Dumais, a press secretary for Municipal Affairs Minister Laurent Lessard. "It's a situation we are taking very seriously," she said.

Provincial public-health officials have led a chorus calling for tougher security rules since 2006, but owners who don't have children or are concerned about cost and aesthetics have won the argument.

"There really is no other solution," said Pierre Maurice, an expert on injury prevention at Quebec's Institut national de santé publique. "Even the best parent in the world cannot count on having nonstop supervision. There will always be a moment where the child gets away."

Municipal officials around Montreal say their inspectors regularly receive complaints about pools that could endanger neighbourhood children, but are powerless over older pools. "All we can do is strongly suggest it," said Joël Goulet, a spokesman for the city of Terrebonne, the scene of one of the recent toddler drownings.

Ms. Friedman said education, swimming lessons at the youngest possible age and isolating pools from homes are all needed. "You have to set up layers of security because no single method is going to work all the time," she said.

Dr. Maurice said education efforts are fine, but nothing can replace the force of law. He said an Australian study showed only 40 per cent of owners fenced off their pools after a drowning or near-drowning.

"It's hard to imagine. If you can't even reach people who have been through an experience like that, it's hard to imagine much else will convince them," Dr. Maurice said.

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