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Doctors see bounce in trampoline injuries

BY CHRIS LACKNER

While trampoline is poised to become an official Olympic sport in Athens this summer, a growing chorus of experts is trying to raise awareness of its dangers.

Medical experts are concerned that children and teenagers will emulate the high-flying antics of trampoline athletes. Canadian athletes offer highly visible role models. Karen Cockburn is currently the world champion, and Mathieu Turgeon took home a bronze medal from the 2000 Olympic Games, when trampoline was only a test sport.

"They're going to make it to look so easy, and we're certainly concerned with kids copying some of these difficult manoeuvres," said Debbie Friedman, head of the Child and Adolescent Trauma Program at the Montreal Children's Hospital. "If you land the wrong way on your neck, you're finished. There's not much room for error."

A press conference was held yesterday at the hospital to draw attention to the recent trampoline injury of a 16-year-old Montreal boy. Although he did not suffer any permanent neurological damage, the young man broke vertebrae in his back. "This child narrowly missed being paralyzed from the waist down," Ms. Friedman said.

oline injuries since the beginning of May — compared with 35 kids throughout all of last summer and fall. Injuries have included bone fractures, sprains and abdominal and head injuries. "This increase in emergency visits reflects a combination of [trampoline] availability and the creativity teenagers and kids are showing in their youth."

The creativity of 16-year-old Curtis Lindsay almost proved disastrous. In an interview from his home yesterday, Curtis said he felt lucky that his injuries were not more serious. The teenager used his trampoline as a diving board into an above-ground pool in his backyard. On his last dive, Curtis's momentum drove his head into the ground. "I was 10 feet in the air and ... went straight down into the pool."

Curtis said he couldn't move his neck or back after sustaining his injury. Doctors say he will have to wear a neck brace for at least six weeks and faces three months of rehabilitation.

Parents need to recognize that trampolines are more than just toys and need constant parental supervision, said Emile Therien, president of the Canada Safety Council. "The council ... advises that parents limit trampoline use to one person at a time, and set a firm 'no flips, no somersaults' rule. It's also important that shock-absorbing pads completely cover all springs, hooks and exposed parts of the frame."

While advocating caution, Mr. Therien still endorses adding a little bounce to life. "They're fun, it's a recreational activity," he said. "A trampoline offers many positive attributes, fitness being one."

But no matter what precautions are taken, parents are not trained spotters, Ms. Friedman said. Olympic athletes and gymnasts benefit from trained supervisors with experience at preventing injuries.

According to the Canadian Hospitals Injury Reporting and Prevention Program, trampoline-related injuries nearly quadrupled throughout the 1990s. Ms. Friedman said the main causes of injury were colliding with other jumpers and landing on either the trampoline springs and frame or the ground. She said parents should not be misled by the safety nets often sold with trampolines.

With files from Canadian Press