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The role of psychology in injury prevention efforts

Injury is a worldwide epidemic, accounting for 9% of global mortality and 5 million deaths each year.¹ The fields of public health, engineering and medicine have been the traditional and successful forerunners in injury prevention, but the race to prevent injury is far from complete. Despite collaborative efforts between traditional injury-related fields and other fields such as the social and behavioural sciences, injury rates continue to escalate in some parts of the world. In the August 2008 issue of *Injury Prevention*, Tran and Hyder² alerted current researchers to the growing burden of injury, and highlighted the dire need for capacity building to tackle this problem.

As psychologists, in this essay we describe ways to stimulate interest in our colleagues to pursue injury-related research and practice. We hope this interest will complement current injury prevention efforts by offering a perspective that supplements traditional injury-related expertise, and ultimately helps to reduce the worldwide injury burden. We target two groups in particular: (a) current psychologists performing work in non-injury-related fields; (b) psychology students who comprise the future generation of researchers and practitioners.

The identified role of psychology in injury research is not a new concept. A decade ago, Tremblay and Peterson³ argued that injury prevention programmes lacked the necessary support of the psychology community and that injury deserved to be a higher priority on our public health agenda. Within the realm of preventing transportation-related injuries, for example, engineers have contributed greatly by minimising the environment's role in increasing the risk of injury. However, engineering and environmental manipulations only go so far, leaving behaviour as a second critical mechanism of change to decrease injury risk.

Psychologists and other behavioural scientists have significant expertise that can and should be applied to injury

prevention efforts. Although psychologists currently contribute a diverse skill base to injury research across a number of injury-related domains, including violence, transportation and rehabilitation, and have done so for decades, their numbers in the field are comparatively slim. An examination of all articles published in the last year of this journal (October 2007 to October 2008) discovered just two articles written by researchers based in a university department of psychology,^{4,5} and only a few others written by scientists based in psychology-relevant departments such as biobehavioural health.

To fill the gap of behavioural scientists in injury, we believe that it is vitally important for psychologists currently studying injury to encourage others in the field to consider how their work may apply to injury science.⁶ As an example, we are currently examining basic cognitive skills in the context of paediatric pedestrian injury. From the perspective of basic psychological research, we conducted a study designed to examine (1) children's and adult's susceptibility to distraction and (2) factors that play a role in one's inability to overcome the distraction. But we also examined these within an applied setting, the pedestrian environment.⁷ Many psychology researchers examine basic psychological processes—personality, family and peer relationships, coping, pain, cognition and decision-making, and others—that could readily be applied to injury science. We urge all injury scientists to educate their psychology colleagues on how their current research programmes might inform injury prevention.

A similar process could be used with psychology students. Injury is not thought of as a traditional psychology subdiscipline. In fact, as a current student in the field, my (Stavrinou) interests upon entry into graduate school were in children's cognitive development. My mentor (Schwebel) encouraged me to think about

the applied nature of the basic processes I was interested in, and this culminated in an injury-related dissertation and a line of research that integrates basic (children's cognitive development) and applied (child injury prevention) ideas. Other psychologists should mentor their students similarly to pass the injury prevention torch to the next generation of scholars.

The International Society for Child and Adolescent Injury Prevention (ISCAIP) is an interdisciplinary society dedicated to reducing paediatric injury rates worldwide. Psychologists form a key component of ISCAIP's membership. ISCAIP's objectives (<http://www.iscaip.net/>) include the fostering of injury prevention initiatives, the translation of research findings into programmes and policies, and the facilitation of collaborative, interdisciplinary international research. With psychologists included in the team of collaborators, injury scientists across all disciplines can cooperate to reduce the paediatric injury burden worldwide.

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