



BLIND MANUFACTURERS'  
ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA

375 Wickham Terrace  
Brisbane Qld 4000  
Australia  
Telephone: (07) 3842 2223  
Facsimile: (07) 3832 3195  
ABN No: 91 093 073 208  
ACN No: 093 073 208

Correspondence to: BMAA Safety Officer  
C/o Energy Shield (Australia) Pty. Ltd.  
PO Box 560, ARTARMON, NSW, 2064.

Consumer Product Safety  
Productivity Commission

Correspondence: PO Box 80,  
Belconnen, ACT, 2616.

Tel: 02

Fax: 02 6240 3300

Dear Sir,

The BMAA wishes to thank you for involving us in the work you are doing, especially as it affects child safety where related to window furnishings. To the best of our knowledge, the BMAA represents all of the major blind manufacturers in Australia.

We now have two and a half year's experience since the implementation of Child Safety measures by the NSW Government, Office of Fair Trading, and as a result we wish to submit the following for consideration:

We have on hand details of Coroners reports with regard to fatalities of children involving window furnishing cords. These reports were supplied to us by MUNCCI (Monash University National Centre for Coronial Information): and Victorian Attorney General.

These case reports give clear descriptions of the age and sex of children at the time of the tragedy, as well as descriptions of the circumstances and the type of window furnishing involved. The most complete information that we have is of incidents which occurred between July 2000 and June 2004, during which time there were six deaths of small children recorded. We take heart in the fact that as late as the 13th of May 2005, MUNCCI, after searching its data base, informed us that there has not been another incident recorded since the June 2004 cut off date. This does not mean that there has not been a case, but that if there has been, then it is still before the Coroner and therefore not yet recorded by MUNCCI.

The facts relating to all the cases we have read so far and as we understand them are:

1. All children who died were under four years of age, most are less than two.
2. All of these cases occurred in the home, either in a bedroom, lounge / family room.
3. In no case was an adult present at the time of the tragedy, even though adults were present in the house.
4. The cases occurred when the window furnishing cord was accessible to the child by either being too close to the ground, cot, bed, lounge or cupboard.
5. Almost every type of window furnishing was involved.
6. Pulling out the suspension cord of a venetian blind or pleated shade is a significant problem in the USA but there is only one incident in the data referred to above.
7. The number of child deaths caused by misadventure involving window furnishing loops in Australia is small compared with some other causes of infant deaths, yet the number is significant and every effort should be made to attempt to reduce the likelihood of future tragedies.
8. There have been no cases of a child dying by accidental strangulation by an external awning cord.

#### BMAA Action :

The problem faced by the BMAA when confronted by the NSW Office of Fair Trading with its Regulations in early 2004, was that we had no knowledge of these tragedies. A survey of the principals of some of our major members, some of whom were men and women in their sixties with 25 to 40 years experience in the industry supported this. The Office of Fair Trading would not give us examples of cases, indeed even under Freedom of Information they put obstacles in our way to find out from their sources. This is despite the fact that we later came into possession, through one of the bereaved mothers, of a document which appears to be a press release from the Minister, John Watkins, dated 15/11/2001 (see attached).

This document states that six children have died, from these causes, in NSW between 1988 and February 2001.

With the regulation before us, an antagonistic Government Department to answer to, no examples of how children had died, minimal details of what was being required of the industry, part of which was compliance with US Standards which took up to a month to obtain a copy of, and with an imminent implementation date, the BMAA and its members set out to do its best to implement the Regulation. All of the Major Manufacturers, suppliers to the industry, fulfilled to the best of their ability and understanding, the requirements of the Regulation.

*(The booklet published by the NSW Office of Fair Trading did not come out till some months after the implementation date.)*

In order to understand the circumstances of these tragedies we went looking for sources of information. On 24/05/2004, Gerard Ryle wrote an article in the Sydney Morning Herald titled "Babies in Peril" and a telephone conversation with Gerard suggested that MUNCCI could be helpful. This enabled the writer to present a report to the Annual General Meeting of the BMAA 22nd July 2004. ( see attached )

Major changes which have occurred in the Australian blind manufacturing industry since the introduction of the NSW legislation:

- For loop operated cords (e.g. Venetians), break away tassels were introduced;
- Cord tensioning devices were introduced for roller blinds;
- Warning labels and stickers have been placed on all blinds and awnings;
- Companies have produced safety flyers/brochures;
- Education of fitters and installers to warn customers of possible dangers;

Overall general awareness by both manufacturers and the public.

## Problems Faced since implementation:

1. The Regulation at present only applies to NSW.  
Major Manufacturers supply product right across the Nation. These Manufacturers do not usually know where the blinds are going to be installed so it has been necessary to supply all blinds with looped cords with the necessary safety warnings and devices. This is regarded by the industry as a contribution to child safety regardless of the lack of Regulation in most States. What is of concern is that other States are considering their own position, and it will create difficulties if each State goes its own way.
2. Small manufacturers, not members of the BMAA.  
There are thousands of small window furnishing businesses across Australia. Most are small local businesses. BMAA Members are bound by an ethical code, but the BMAA cannot speak for these small non associated businesses.
3. The BMAA represents Blind Manufacturers.  
Window furnishings are not just limited to blinds but also to curtains, etc..
4. There is an attitude across the country, amongst a significant proportion of the population, that parents should be the ones responsible for their children.  
This has resulted in some customers not purchasing blinds or insisting that safety devices not be installed with their blinds. This has placed pressure on sales people and installers. The people that the writer has met, who have these attitudes could not be described as dumb or stupid. They have all been mature, many well educated and caring people. Most have safely raised families and some are even periodic carers of grandchildren. Some even have a history of responsible service to the community.
5. Most customers tend to remove warning tags.
6. In some modern Commercial buildings it is not possible to fit safety devices.
  - Screws cannot be driven into glass.
  - Marble or other types of stone will be defaced.
  - Some window frames are structural or carry services and building owners prohibit the fitting of blinds to them. In these cases, tenants can void their lease if they allow installers to fit safety devices.
  - Managing Directors have been known to oppose their use in their offices because they do not see the need.

## BMAA Recommendations:

1. That we as an Association continue to make every effort to encourage members to:
  - Educate staff, distributors and in turn the public of the dangers.
  - Ensure that approved safety devices be used in all at risk locations.
  - Share information on safety devices.

*We plead with Governments to approach this issue openly and work with the industry in a spirit of cooperation for the sake of the children and their families.*
2. That:
  - a. Safety devices and warning tags be fitted to all new blinds where children may be exposed to danger.
  - b. Child safety information sheets be made available to every customer.

That is for blinds supplied and fitted to all homes, pre-schools, hospital wards, etc., where there are likely to be children.
3. That where the bottom of a loop is 1600 mm above the point where adults stand, or more, that safety devices not be mandatory.

There should be latitude given to installers with regard to this. For example, wheelchair bound clients and height limited people cannot cope with this requirement. There is also a problem with blinds over kitchen sinks, which could well be exempted.

*This is not the case in NSW or WA, where the requirement is for the loop to be 1600 mm up from the bottom of the blind, but it is stated in the brochure issued by the Federal Government's Consumer Safety Unit of The Treasury. Our Association does not agree with the NSW/WA determination.*
4. The BMAA is concerned with the other stream of the industry, i.e. cheap imported products being sold by hardware and department stores.

These window coverings do not all carry safety warning tags, the cords can be any length. These blinds cater for the DIY market. Homeowners are not shortening the length of the cords following installation and are not attaching the safety devices. Currently there is no linkage between the Australian blind manufacturers producing and installing made-to-measure blinds, and the hardware/department stores selling cheap imported products. The BMAA believes that it is the responsibility of government to approach retailers and importers and require that imported product not be accepted unless they meet all aspects of the safety standard.

That all blinds manufactured or imported and all custom blinds made for Do-it-Yourself installation be supplied with safety devices, warning tags and a warning notice / sheet .

*Our Association is emphatic on this point. This type of blind, whether custom made or packaged is bought for self installation. These customers do not have the same benefit of a salesperson or an installer to advise or warn them of the dangers that Supply and Fit customers have.*

*BMAA recommends that the product safety legislation be expanded to include services associated with the industry, e.g. installation, and that only blinds which meet the mandatory safety standards can be imported/sold in Australia.*
5. Australian manufacturers must ensure that their fitters explain to the homeowner the safety implications.

*This does not occur within the DIY market. There is a suggestion that blinds only be installed by a licensed fitter.*
6. That the fitting of safety devices etc., be optional for blinds installed in commercial premises or locations where children are not normally present, or if present are under constant supervision.

*We cite here examples that come to mind: Petrol Service Stations behind the counter or the stock racks, but not in restaurants beside the tables. Commercial offices, factory offices, government offices, warehouses, factories but definitely not in child minding & crèches. We would not exempt hotel and motel rooms which for the location can be regarded as temporary homes.*
7. That uniform regulations be promulgated between all the States and Territories of Australia.

*This is essential, because large quantities of window furnishings cross state & territory boundaries. That there are manufacturers who supply to many hundreds of distributors right across Australia, to some only infrequently and to some who also trade across borders.*

8. That every effort be made to promote these recommendations to all manufacturers, importers and sellers of window furnishings with loops.

*This will require a public relations exercise to demonstrate that:*

1. *These deaths are real and they are preventable.*
2. *That these deaths have resulted in terrible suffering for the families involved.*
3. *That with a small attitude change on the part of salesmen and installers, the effort is not onerous.*

*There are thousands of window furnishing businesses across Australia, and although the BMAA represents the major blind manufacturers, there are still thousands of small manufacturers and manufacturers of other types of window furnishing who will have to be contacted by the State.*

9. External blinds, awnings, etc., with looped operating cords.

Our Association does not recommend any safety devices or warnings.

*We are not aware of any incident in Australia where a child has been strangled by one of these.*

*None were listed in any of the Coroners reports that we have seen.*

*We are looking at preventing misadventure of little ones who do not know the dangers and who do not have the dexterity or understanding of how to extract themselves from these dangerous situations.*

*We are not looking at potential suicide.*

*It has been suggested by a major awning manufacturer, that if the WA Government goes ahead with its Regulation to require external awnings to have their cord loops made safe, that a number of small operators will be put out of business.*

#### Cost to the industry.

There are several areas of cost to the industry:

1. Unit cost per blind

It is estimated that the unit cost of a safety device, warning tags and information sheet to the industry is about six dollars per blind fitted. This is an add on expense of between one to six percent per blind. Most manufacturers and installers have probably not passed these costs on to their clients.

2. Lost sales

It may not be possible to estimate these losses, but where one seller is prepared to install and not use safety devices, there will be lost sales to those responsible sellers who insist. Many of those who insist do so, not for altruistic reasons but out of fear of the consequences if they do not comply. The cavalier either do not perceive a risk or are prepared to take the risk, some because they either have minimal assets or are debt ridden with losses being passed on to their creditors.

3. Costs of altering blind design in order to comply with the Regulation.

4. Fixed costs of tooling to manufacture safety devices, cost of copy for printing etc.

5. The potential that some small businesses will have to close their doors

The first of these costs is relatively easy to estimate, the other three are specific to particular products and manufacturers.

To what does the BMAA attribute the success of the project ?

The BMAA would say that the primary reason the project has so far been successful is :

**publicity,**

and the most important part of this publicity is the knowledge that these tragedies are real and preventable.

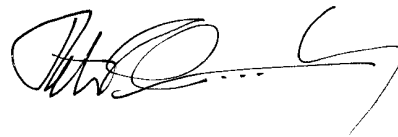
The efforts by responsible manufacturers to make their products as safe as possible without going out of business, and educating sales staff and installers to use their skills to educate customers has complemented the work done in the media.

Being able to relate to the folk who have lost little ones and the circumstances of the tragedies was very valuable.

For the project to continue to be successful, the publicity must continue, and the BMAA looks to all Governments to do their part, but the BMAA and any other industry Association must continue to remind its members to stay on the ball with staff and their education of customers.

On behalf of our Association, I would like to thank you once again for involving our Association in this exercise.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Schweinsberg', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

**Peter Schweinsberg**

Safety Officer - Blind Manufacturers Association of Australia



NEW SOUTH WALES

# Minister for Fair Trading

## **BLIND CORDS BANNED AFTER SIX NSW INFANT DEATHS**

November 15, 2001

Hazardous curtain and blind cords will be banned in NSW after the strangling death of six NSW infants, including two deaths in the past two years.

The NSW Fair Trading Minister, John Watkins, said today that mandatory design changes would prevent looped cords being used in all new household blinds.

The ban will come into effect on September 1, 2002 - allowing time *for a* Product Safety Standard to be drafted and for industry to make manufacturing changes.

In the meantime, a statewide education campaign will advise householders about the threat and suggest modifications to make old blinds safer.

"Most people do not give much thought to the cords used to open and close curtains and blinds,' Mr Watkins said.

"But bitter experience shows that looped blind cords and young children do not mix under any circumstances," he said.

"it would be any parent's worst nightmare to have their child injured or even killed by such an. everyday object."

*The safety* changes affect blind cords that are too long or doubled over to form a *Loop*,

Alarm bells should ring when the looped cord is long enough for a toddler to reach it, when the cord hangs near cots or beds, or when the loop can fit over a child's head,

The increased popularity of full-length blinds in recent years has made blind cords even more accessible.

In March this year, Mr Watkins asked the NSW Products Safety Committee (PSC) to investigate blind cords after two tragic deaths.

On February 11, 2000, a two-year-old Albury girl strangled on a vertical blind cord next to her bed.

On February 14, 2001. an 18-month-old Wagga Wagga girl was found in her cot with a venetian blind cord around her neck.

According to the Surgical Research Unit at Westmead Children's Hospital, four other NSW toddlers, from 11 months to *three years*, *have* died since 1908 after becoming entangled in blind cords.

## **Strangulation of Children by Looped Window Furnishing Cords.**

**Report by Peter Schweinsberg at the General Meeting of the BMAA 22nd July 2004**

Children are dying as a result of catching their necks in internal window furnishing loops and being strangled.

When the matter was raised, over two years ago, by the NSW Office of Fair Trading, we could all accept that it was possible, but could not believe that it was an issue. Twenty three years in the industry and I had never heard of a case. Those that I spoke to in the industry, principals in their own Companies, some with years more experience in the industry than mine, could not recall a case either.

Thanks to the Monash University National Centre for Coronial Information and their collection of data from the various Coroners Offices across Australia, we are now aware that six children have lost their lives by window furnishing cord strangulation between 1st of July 2000 and the 30th June 2004.

I would like to express my gratitude and thanks to Marde Hoy at Monash for expediting the report that made this presentation possible. Marde knowing that I would be reporting to this meeting today, searched the files, obtained authorization from the various Coroners Offices to release the information and E-mailed her report before I left to be here.

All before we have received an invoice for her work, let alone paid for it.

Marde also made available four URLs for information on the Web (see last page).

One yielded a Hansard report of a speech by Tasmanian MP, Mr Harry Quick.

He reported to the House the tragic death of a little girl called Zoe Hart.

One was for a web site where you could buy a device like a retractable tape measure which could be used to retract blind cords.

The other two were copies of the Commonwealth Government brochure and poster.

The Tasmanian Hansard report provided enough information to identify Zoe's parents and the town where they lived. A White Pages On Line search provided their phone number. It was with a degree of trepidation that I took the risk to ring and leave my contact details on their answering machine. Deane, Zoe's mum, returned my call the next day, and was so pleased to hear that our industry was taking this matter seriously. She provided me with a file of information and statistics for which we should be truly grateful. Deanne has been lobbying governments and anyone else who will listen to try to eliminate a recurrence of the cause of her baby's death.

One of the items Deanne sent me was a document under the letterhead:

"NSW, Minister of Fair Trading", dated 15th of November 2001 and headed: "BLIND CORDS BANNED AFTER SIX NSW INFANT DEATHS" .

It states these cases occurred in 1988, 1989, 1990, 1998, 2000 and 2001, that the children were all aged between 11 months and three years, and it gives a brief description of each tragedy. The report also documents deaths in Queensland ( 1 ) and Western Australia ( 2 ), as well as incidents resulting in injury.

This document was kindly provided to me by Deanne Hart.

Yet, try as we may, I and a number of members of our committee could not get any of this information from the Department of Fair Trading. Months ago an officer of the department mentioned a Tasmanian case, probably Zoe's, but the information was vague. A written request and a subsequent application under Freedom of Information met with legalistic animosity and obstruction. Helpfulness, none at all.

I am personally disgusted with this Department and the staff I have dealt with.

I am ashamed to think that they are fellow Australians.



## **Strangulation of Children by Looped Window Furnishing Cords.**

**Report by Peter Schweinsberg at the General Meeting of the BMAA 22nd July 2004**

The BMAA is an organization which represents the industry, an organization of responsible manufacturers and suppliers. It is made up of people who are parents and grand parents, people who have lived with the role of safely raising their families. People who feel responsible for the safety of their customers and their families. It is an organization which can make a real contribution to the implementation of the Office of Fair Trading's Regulation, yet that department did its best to ensure that we would not have the information which would help facilitate our task.

This information would have helped us to sell the dangers of window furnishings loops to our members and their staff, and through them to the public at large.

So what do we now know of these children's deaths and near death experiences ?

The six children reported by the MUNCCI were all aged between 1 and 2 years, and they were spread across four states.

The children in the NSW Minister of Fair Trading Report were all between 1 and 4 years.

It would appear that:

- All were all at home.

- Parents or Grand Parents were at home with them, but not in the same room. Most were in their own cots or beds.

- At least one case was in a lounge or family room.

- In all cases it would appear that beds or lounges were beside a cord or chain. The window furnishings involved in the MUNCCI cases were spread across: curtain cords, vertical louvre cords, venetian blind cords and roller blind cords.

- In one case the child pulled the suspension cord out of the pleats of a pleated shade and put its head through the loop.

The one thing in common is a loop in the cord or chain.

There is no evidence in the coroner's reports of another person, even another child being involved in the deaths.

In the cases listed in the NSW Minister of Fair Trading Report, they were all specified as: vertical blinds or venetian blind cords, with one case of a curtain cord. Some of the cases were non specific with regard to the cords.

The conditions at the time of these incidents were not as clear as they appear in the MUNCCI Coroner's reports.

## **Strangulation of Children by Looped Window Furnishing Cords.**

Report by Peter Schweinsberg at the General Meeting of the BMAA 22nd July 2004

What we need to be aware of is the nature of these tragic experiences:

Zoe Hart, was a much loved and exuberant little girl.

She kept climbing out of her cot, so her mum and dad, Deanne and Steve gave her a big bed to sleep in. On the occasion of her death she climbed up on the drawers beside the bed, got caught in the blind cord loop, somehow twisted it and died.

Another child was in the care of its grand parents.

They heard crying, but it soon stopped, so did not respond, as you would.

An hour later they found the baby dead.

A father, concerned by the curtain cord knotted it, supposedly out of reach, but the baby was strangled by the knot.

When I read these cases I could not help but to put myself into the mind of those who lost these little ones:

The parents who did not in their wildest dreams consider the blind cord beside their baby's chest of drawers a danger.

The grand parents who did not respond to a cry.

The father who thought he was protecting his children by tying a knot in the cord.

The parents who never thought that something as normal as a blind cord could be so dangerous.

All of these people will live with these tragedies for the rest of their lives.

What can we do about it ?

We can "gossip" it with our staff and customers, to create awareness.

Train our staff on the correct way to use safety devices.

Hand out copies of the brochures supplied by the Commonwealth Government.

Get sales staff to talk about what we must do when on site with the customer.

Insist that regulations be followed by installers at all times. No exceptions.

*( I would appreciate it if members would add to this list so that we can be as thorough as possible.)*

The thing that stands out from all of this is that there is no evidence that any of these babies died in commercial premises. By this I mean: offices, factories, shops and the like. Places where children are seldom seen, and if present are visiting under adult supervision. Therefore why should not the various governments consider exempting these locations from the Regulation.

None of these incidents involved children of school age.

This raises the question of whether schools and places where children of school age and under constant supervision should not be exempt also.

## **Strangulation of Children by Looped Window Furnishing Cords.**

**Report by Peter Schweinsberg at the General Meeting of the BMAA 22nd July 2004**

I would suggest therefore, that the Association bring this matter to the various Government departments attention, so that they can consider releasing the industry from the blanket provisions of the regulations.

By suggesting this, I would not for one moment include crèches, and child minding centres, even children's hospital wards and pre Schools.

We have a task in front of us to do all we can to protect little ones from misadventure. Now that we have the facts in front of us and can relate to individual tragedies, we can be very positive in our endeavours.

URLs that have helped:

<http://www.safetysteps.com/catalog/item.cfm#> - go looking for Blindwinder

<http://www.harryquick.com/speeches/Child%20Safety%206%20June%202003.htm>

[http://www.consumersonline.gov.au/downloads/Blind\\_Cord\\_Safety\\_Brochure.pdf](http://www.consumersonline.gov.au/downloads/Blind_Cord_Safety_Brochure.pdf)

[Http://www.consumersonline.gov.au/downloads/Blind\\_Cord\\_%20Safety\\_Poster.pdf](Http://www.consumersonline.gov.au/downloads/Blind_Cord_%20Safety_Poster.pdf)

Peter Schweinsberg B.Sc, MBA (AGSM)

Partner: Reflective Blinds

Managing Director: Energy Shield (Australia) Pty. Ltd.

Tel: 02 9417 4444

Fax: 02 9417 7581

E-mail: [peters@reflectiveblinds.com.au](mailto:peters@reflectiveblinds.com.au)

Correspondence to:

PO Box 560, ARTARMON, NSW, 2064.