Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine
National Coroners Information System
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NCIS

Review of the Australian Consumer Product Related System

Productivity Commission Round Table discussion

Wednesday 12 October 2005

The National Coroners Information System (NCIS) is a national database managed with the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine which contains information about every death reported to a coroner around Australia from July 2000 (1 January 2001 for Queensland).

As part of the information coded about each fatality on the NCIS, a determination as to whether the death was "product related" is made.

Current difficulties experienced with this manner of coding & identifying product related deaths on the NCIS are:

- NCIS scope is very wide, as the definition includes any consumable product and does not identify the role the product played in the injury/death but rather only that there was a product in use at the time of the injury/death;

- There is currently no national definition of what is considered "a product", so it is therefore difficult to determine what is a "product related" death;

- Currently we do not have the ability to distinguish which product related deaths were due to "misuse" or the "normal operation of the product" as opposed to "faulty" products;

- NCIS is currently a REACTIVE SYSTEM – someone has to think of a question to research rather than using the system to identify potential product safety hazard or trends proactively.

- Up to three Mechanisms of Injury and/or Object or Substance Producing Injury can be coded for each death entered into the NCIS, this means that only one of the mechanisms and/or objects/substance involved needs to be product related to result in the entire case being classified as product related. This makes research on specific product related deaths very difficult if relying solely on the Product Related data field.

The NCIS has recognised these current system limitations in relation to the product related field, and will most probably implement the following enhancements over the next few years:

- Revise the Product Related concept by adding at least one additional data field. Currently NCIS uses a simply YES/NO/UNKNOWN code to identify the involvement of a product in a death. – As indicated in the Discussion Draft, this results in a large number of external cause deaths being classified as product related deaths

  The additional data field will allow coders to indicate the contribution the product made to the injury/death. Possible options for the codeset for this data field include:

  - Correct Use
  - Faulty
  - Inadequate Design / Design Fault
  - Inadequate Instructions
  - Incidental Involvement
  - Misuse
  - Unlikely To Be Known
  - Unreasonable Safety/Knowledge Standards
  - Vehicle Crash

  This additional coding will allow NCIS users to conduct searches on more specific subsets relating to product related deaths.

- Revise the concept of the "entire case" being product related to the "individual Mechanism/Object" being product related. This would involve moving the data fields from the current location on the Case Detail screen to each of the three Mechanism of Injury screens so the each object's involvement can be individual identified and coded as a product as appropriate.

- A trend analysis tool is to be developed to a "proof of concept" level, to determine whether it is possible for the NCIS to become more proactive in identifying trends/hazards concerning deaths reported to a coroner, which would include those involving certain products.

In addition to these enhancements, the NCIS would recommend that the following be considered:

- All relevant product safety agencies to apply to access the NCIS to enable regular monitoring and analysis of product related fatalities and/or;

- Additional funding be provided to the NCIS to allow a regular report concerning the frequency and circumstances concerning product related deaths to be provided to all relevant product safety bodies.

- Funding be provided to modify the NCIS to satisfy the majority of the requirements of Option 8. It is our opinion that much of the necessary infrastructure that would need to be established to implement a national monitoring system concerning product related hazards already exists to a large extent within the NCIS. Some cost savings regarding the establishment of a national monitoring tool (for product related deaths at least) could therefore be made by utilising the existing NCIS infrastructure.

Points of Interest/Comments:

Option 2 – Foreseeable Misuse

NCIS would like to incorporate the concept into the data dictionary to provide additional guidance in the coding of Product related incidents. However, we are not certain it would be effective as the scope of uses for any product is very wide. We would need to offer a very clear definition of the "not reasonable" statement. Table 7.1 (pg181) is definitely a good start.

Option 8 – Product Safety Research

"Baseline study of consumer product-related injuries and deaths" (pg XL11) to establish

- Current number of incidents;
- Costs associated with adverse Product Related events;
- Possible roles played by product fault and consumer behaviour

NCIS can potentially fulfil two of the three aims detailed above, at least for death data. This would be a start to the accurate collection and dissemination of data which could then be fed out to other sources of data once perfected or reliable.

Drawback – Cost

The challenge of developing a national collection system may be benefited by the utilisation of an already existing system that collects and demonstrates data, which would inturn demonstrate the advantages of establishing a wider data collection system. NCIS could be used as the base system, developed and analysed to validate the need to a national data collection of product related events. Once a wider system is established NCIS data can be downloaded to ensure complete coverage of all Product Related events.

The update and use of NCIS as a pre-cursor to a national system for Product Related events would be considerably cheaper as the system and data collection procedures are already in place. Expenditure would ensure that appropriate data fields were included in the collection and training was provided to guarantee adequate coding of relevant data.

We would readily accept the challenge of modifying the NCIS to provide data on the product related deaths throughout Australia.

Other items of interest:

The Productivity Commission may wish to follow up on the information below:

- *The Economic Value of a Human Life*
  A recent report conducted by PriceWaterhouseCoopers for the NCIS stated that although the estimates of the value of life vary considerably, the median value of life for Australians can be assumed to be $650,000.

- *New Zealand Interest in Joining NCIS*
  New Zealand has expressed interest in submitting data to the NCIS. Although significant work would be required to the New Zealand coronial system, the availability of the New Zealand death data would certainly increase the usefulness of NCIS to the Consumer Product Safety Unit.

Correction to information within Discussion Paper

- Within Box C.2 of the Discussion Paper, it is stated that the Research Injury Surveillance Unit (RISU) at Flinders University was asked by the Blind Manufacturers Association of Australia to identify any child deaths involving blind cord strangulation. This is incorrect. RISU was asked to identify such cases by the Australian Department of Health and Ageing. The Blind Manufacturers Association later contacted the NCIS directly, and requested de-identified case information about the circumstances of these fatalities to assist in the acceptance of new NSW Regulations relating to the manufacture of blinds.