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Consumer Product Safety

During the last two decades, there has been a great outpouring of new consumer goods. Many of these have involved novel materials with properties and behavior that the typical citizen is not well prepared to cope with. In some instances, manufacturers have not given sufficient consideration to the ways in which their products might be used or abused. While it is probable that most accidents involving consumer goods are caused by carelessness on the part of the users, a substantial number are caused by defects in the products. Over the years, dramatic incidents, especially those involving severe injury or death to children, have created a climate of public opinion necessitating governmental action.

As a first step, President Johnson in 1968 appointed a National Commission on Product Safety. This commission held extensive hearings, the record of which occupies some 8000 pages. Products used around the home and in recreation are involved in accidents that injure 20 million people each year. About 17 million of these require medical attention. Ten of the most important sources of injury are appliances (500,000), kitchen gadgets and serving utensils (500,000), cooking devices (150,000), home furnishings (500,000), home fixtures (2.5 million), heating devices (175,000), home workshop (125,000), home tools (750,000), yard and garden equipment (500,000), and recreational equipment and activities (8 million).

The findings of the commission led to a Consumer Product Safety Act that was recently signed into law. The new legislation covers an enormous range of products and has for its purposes:

- 1) to protect the public against unreasonable risks of injury associated with consumer products;
- 2) to assist consumers in evaluating the comparative safety of consumer products;
- 3) to develop uniform safety standards for consumer products and to minimize conflicting state and local regulations; and
- 4) to promote research and investigation into the causes and prevention of product-related deaths, illnesses, and injuries.

The new act provides machinery for regulating a host of products not previously subject to federal scrutiny. It is likely to have profound consequences on the economy. To administer the law, a Consumer Product Safety Commission, having considerable independence and authority, is to be appointed. Among other powers, the commission may ban products it deems unreasonably dangerous.

Even before the commission has been appointed, the Bureau of Product Safety has established a means for rapid identification of hazardous products. A National Electronic Injury Surveillance System (NEISS) monitors the emergency rooms of 119 hospitals to compile national injury estimates. The system reports on visits to emergency rooms resulting from accidents caused by consumer products. Data from a day's events are accumulated overnight in a computer in Washington and are available for all the kinds of analysis that a computer can quickly render.

We live in an increasingly complex world—one in which even highly educated citizens must feel a sense of helplessness in trying to make judgments about many of the consumer products and chemicals. No government can save its citizens from all the folly their fertile minds can invent. But government should make it possible for careful people to minimize the possibility of injury. The new Consumer Product Safety Act is a large step in that direction.—PHILIP H. ABELSON

Additional information can be obtained from the Office of Information, Bureau of Product Safety, 5401 West Bard Avenue, Bethesda, Maryland 20016.