

# Efficient, reliable injury data collection saves lives

Years ago, electric frying pans, coffee pots and other kitchen appliances came with long cords so people could put them anywhere on the counter, no matter where the electric plug was. But long cords were easy for children to grab, pull, and dump hot coffee, grease or other liquids on themselves.

Thanks to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, appliance cords are now short. Bicycles no longer have long “banana seats” that tempt children to add extra riders. Paint no longer contains added lead. Crib rails are close enough together so that a baby’s head can’t fit through. Child safety seats are engineering marvels.

UNC School of Public Health Alumnus Dr. Robert Verhalen created the data collection system for the Consumer Product Safety Commission that led to these and many other life-saving, injury-reducing changes. For 22 years, he headed the Commission’s epidemiology section, collecting data about injuries all over the country. The Commission then used those data to decide which products to investigate and regulate, and what actions to recommend to Congress.

“He was a pioneer in product safety,” says Dr. Carol Runyan, director of the UNC Injury Prevention Research Center. “He was a very innovative, important con-

tributor to injury prevention throughout his career at the Consumer Product Safety Commission.”

Runyan nominated Verhalen for the American Public Health Association’s Distinguished Career Award, which he received in 1999.

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A native of Lake Bluff, Ill., Verhalen joined the Marine Corps after high school, then went to the University of Iowa on the GI bill, studying zoology with a concentration in parasitology. After graduation, he became the parasitologist for the Lake County, Ill., health department.

“There weren’t enough parasites in Lake County to keep me busy,” he says, “so they made me a sanitarian and the safety representative.” He had no background in safety, so when he heard Carolina’s School of Public Health was offering a one-week course in injury prevention, he signed up.

“I was fascinated by it,” he says. “I decided I wanted to come back to Carolina and get a master’s degree.” That fall, he packed up his family and moved to Chapel Hill to study health administration. One year later, degree in hand, he went to Atlanta as the housing hygiene and accident prevention consultant for the Georgia Department of Health. He also was in charge of 11 poison control centers across Georgia.

“I started trying to do research on

accidents,” he says, “but I didn’t have sufficient analytic tools in statistics and epidemiology.”

He contacted his teachers at UNC— Drs. John Cassel and Al Tyroler— and asked if he could get a doctorate in epidemiology with a concentration in injury prevention.

While earning his DrPH, he worked at the UNC Highway Safety Research Center and in the School's Department of Health Administration.

In his second year, he was asked to assume leadership of the injury task force on a presidential commission on product safety, which, in 1970, recommended establishing the National Consumer Product Safety Commission. He was appointed head of the new agency's Bureau of Epidemiology when it was established in 1973.

His first challenge was to find a way to collect reliable data.

"Historically, the federal government had been relying on newspaper stories, small local studies and that kind of thing," he says. "That wasn't adequate."

The commission agreed to define "injury" as an event requiring professional medical attention. He enlisted 14 hospitals as a pilot test to report injuries treated in their emergency rooms.

"In the first nine months, those 14 hospitals reported 85,000 cases," he says, "so we knew that system was going to work, so we went national."

It became known as the National Electronic Injury Surveillance System (NEISS).

Eventually, Verhalen's system was used to collect other sorts of data, including injuries caused by medical devices and non-prescription drugs for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration; injuries caused by firearms for the U.S. Department of Justice; and injuries caused by environmental factors for the Environmental Protection Agency. After a while, NEISS collected data from hospital emergency departments for 11 different federal agencies.

"It was much more cost-effective for the government and much less of an administrative burden on the emergency rooms" than having separate systems, he says.

When Verhalen retired from the Consumer Product Safety Commission in 1995, he planned to sail through the Great Lakes, down the Mississippi River and around Florida.

"But as soon as word got out I was going to retire, my phone started ringing," he says. He was in hot demand by many companies



PHOTO BY PAUL CRANE

as an injury analysis consultant. He started a consulting business with his son. Then, in late 2007, he started working with the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, researching traffic safety injuries. He and his wife, Phyllis, still live in the Washington suburbs of Virginia, and Verhalen is a member of the School's Public Health Foundation, Inc., Board of Directors.

"I sold the sailboat," he says. "I'm still having too much fun with my career." ■

— BY RAMONA DUBOSE

Dr. Robert Verhalen created the data collection system for the Consumer Product Safety Commission that led to many life-saving, injury-reducing changes throughout the United States. Verhalen holds a doctorate in epidemiology from Carolina's School of Public Health.