



The dangers of being a barefooted operator

by Martin Johnston
health reporter

People who inadvertently slash their bare feet while mowing the lawns are suffering one of the commonest “silly” injuries Dr Dale Hanson treats in his emergency department.

“They push or pull the mower over their bare feet, sustaining very nasty, deep lacerations.

“It is hard for working clinicians not to be impressed by the silly things people do,” said the Queensland doctor, who will address the conference of the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine in Wellington today.

Another “silly” accidental injury he sometimes saw was burns inflicted by someone drying their hair with a faulty blow-dryer while standing in a puddle of water in the bathroom.

The appliance shorted out through the person’s hand, earthing via the feet into the water, leaving a serious electrical burn to the hand.

“The burn can be very deep and take a long time to heal.”

But Dr Hanson’s main theme is to highlight the environmental and social causes of the “epidemic” of injuries, which he says is often under-recognised in comparison with epidemics of illness.

Accidental and intentional injuries are the leading cause of death for New Zealanders aged between 1 and 34. Injuries are responsible for 60 per cent

of deaths among children and 80 per cent among adolescents.

Only in the middle and older age groups do cancer and cardiovascular disease take over as the leading killers — apart from the first year of life and earlier, when deaths in the weeks before or after childbirth account for most fatalities.

Dr Hanson said numerous changes could be made to a city’s physical environment to make it safer, like improving lighting in public places to reduce crime.

The public acceptance of seatbelts in cars was an example of “social redesign” that had reduced injuries.

He estimates emergency department presentations at his hospital in Mackay have fallen by 12 per cent since 2000.

That was when the city joined the World Health Organisation’s Safe Communities project, which had led to changes to the city’s physical and social environment.

Nine New Zealand cities and districts have joined the scheme, including North Shore, Waitakere, Whangarei and Tauranga.

Preventing injuries is a major part of the Accident Compensation Corporation’s work.

It is also involved in the Government’s multi-agency Injury Prevention Strategy, launched in 2003 with the stated vision of “a safe New Zealand, becoming injury-free”.