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Subjects: product safety.

HIPSLEY: Well children's strollers that sever fingers, cots that collapse, toys made with toxic chemicals: despite the best efforts of our regulatory bodies, dodgy goods slip through the cracks and into the market place, sometimes to deadly effect.

At least 15 Australian children, for example, have been strangled by blind and curtain cords since the early 1990s. But often, warnings and government recalls are lost along the information superhighway. Well, to try and counter this, the Federal Government's launched a new consumer-targeted website - kind of a one-stop shop, with information on standards, recalls and safety tips.

Joining us now for more on that - the Federal Minister for Consumer Affairs, Craig Emerson. Minister, good morning.

EMERSON: Good morning Anna.

HIPSLEY: What is - first of all - the level of information to the public about safety issues and recalls of products at the moment?

EMERSON: At the moment it's scattered all around the place. In press releases, in state fair trading departments, on their websites, in newspapers, you name it. And that's the problem. It's difficult if anyone wants to find more information, not only about unsafe products, but the use of what are ordinarily regarded as safe products, but where accidents can happen. You just mentioned the curtain cords, and the 15 kids who lost their lives through

those. And I'm on the website right now. And there's, for example, a question - where can I buy safety devices for blinds and curtain cords? This is the sort of information that consumers - mums and dads - really want. And now they'll have it in one easy, convenient location.

HIPSLEY: So the idea is to draw all these recalls, product information, and safety devices, et cetera, into one spot.

EMERSON: That's right. And when you think of all the research that's being done, say for strollers and prams, over the years, braking devices, and so on, this brings it all together. And the wisdom that comes with that research, so we can identify those features of otherwise safe products that might have led to a lot of accidents. Another example - you'd think a ladder is of itself a pretty safe product, but quite a lot of men - 19 of them a year - die falling off a ladder. So this website contains information about how to use ladders more safely.

HIPSLEY: Does it address the problem at all of these faulty products getting into the market place in the first place?

EMERSON: It does, but we have a very good, new, product safety system such that if anyone, any state, becomes aware of an unsafe product, under the new laws that we're getting through the parliament, what will happen is that that state can take action, not only through its own office of fair trading, but it must notify the Commonwealth - the ACCC - and we spread that information to all the states.

There were, a few years ago, Bindi Beads containing a hallucinogenic substance that kids, I think in Queensland, were eating and kind of freaking out - it took about three weeks for those Bindi Beads to be banned around Australia, because that's how long it took the information to be disseminated around Australia.

And what we've got with this new system is an immediate alert to all jurisdictions, all states and territories, so that when an unsafe product is identified, it can be banned right around the place.

HIPSLEY: We were speaking to the NSW Fair Trading Minister Linda Burney a few months back, and she was saying the issue is there's - as much as government tries - these toys, some things from China, they end up in the market place, because they've slipped through the gaps in customs. So they're...

EMERSON: And that's true, yes.

HIPSLEY: Yeah. So how do you stop the products coming in in the first place?

EMERSON: Well it is just one of these dilemmas. But it may be an unsafe product. And we do have pretty vigilant officers in the fair trading departments, in the ACCC. And if there are any complaints

about these products, then we can act very quickly and spread the news that these products are unsafe, and then we can and will insist on them being withdrawn from the market.

I'll give you an example: about six weeks ago, we were alerted to a product in Australia that was already banned, and we had the ACCC officers, when we learnt of this on a Friday night, they were on the door of that importer, at 9 o'clock the next morning, finding out where the product had been sent. Fortunately in that case it had only been sent to one or two hardware stores, and we were able to stop it. But that's the sort of work that goes on behind the scenes to keep products as safe as possible for mums and dads and kids.

HIPSLEY: Okay, and I must mention the website as well - productsafety.gov.au. We'll put a link up on our own website to that information site. Craig Emerson, thanks so much for your time this morning.

EMERSON: Thanks for having me on the program, Anna.

HIPSLEY: Our Federal Minister for Consumer Affairs, Craig Emerson there.

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