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THE  
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REPORT

## **Dangers of soccer goal posts ignored**

Reporter: Emma Alberici

KERRY O'BRIEN: Nearly half a million junior soccer players will kick off their season this weekend.

Soccer is now the country's most popular team sport.

But there's a hidden danger in the sport that few parents are aware of, and it doesn't just threaten kids on the field.

The threat is posed by falling goal posts.

They weigh up to 250 kilograms and have crushed and killed at least seven people in Australia since 1986.

In the US, where they do keep official statistics on what might seem to us an unlikely and obscure issue, there is one death a year and a further 120 people treated in emergency rooms after being struck by the posts.

After nine deaths in England, soccer authorities there have launched a wide-ranging safety campaign.

But in Australia, it seems little action has been taken to prevent such tragedies on the soccer field.

Emma Alberici reports.

EMMA ALBERICI: In just 12 months the image of this happy family has been shattered.

India Verity, the little girl with the big smile, died two weeks after her third birthday.

WILLIAM VERITY (HOME VIDEO): Hey, India, tell me what day it is today.

INDIA VERITY: Birthday day.

WILLIAM VERITY: And how old are you?

INDIA: Three.

CAROLINE VERITY: She was having a great morning, a really top morning, and she and her little friends were singing around to the Wiggles and doing rock-a-bye your bear and doing all the actions.

EMMA ALBERICI: It was a Saturday morning in June last year, Caroline and India Verity were watching 6-year-old Joe playing soccer at the local gala day.

CAROLINE VERITY: We walked past this goal post and it fell and it, um and it -- I saw it coming out of the corner of my eye and it hit me first and I turned because I just wanted to get her under me, but I didn't manage to and it hit her in the head and, um, anyway, eventually ambulances came and we went to the hospital.

She died in hospital, I think it was about an hour later.

KERRY O'BRIEN: What Caroline and William Verity believed was a bizarre, one-off accident, they were

horrified to discover was anything but.

REPORTER (ABC NEWS, 1990): Several students were trying to move the goal and all let go except Andrew, the top bar fell across his neck and he died shortly after.

EMMA ALBERICI: 7-year-old Andrew Clark died in Tasmania in 1990.

Incredibly, on the same day, just two hours later in another accident only 30 kilometres away in Hobart, 13-year-old Luke Scott was paralysed when a soccer post fell on him while he was watching a team training session.

While there are no official statistics, research by the 7:30 Report has revealed that seven people have died in Australia over the past 18 years, most of them children.

One of them, a 17-year-old, was killed when the structure collapsed on him while he was doing chin-ups on it.

WILLIAM VERITY: What we've discovered is that there's nothing freak about it at all, that basically every time you're going on to a soccer field, it's like buying a lottery ticket and if nothing happens within the next five years another child will die.

Statistically, that's what will happen.

EMMA ALBERICI: But it wasn't until the 1999 death of 10-year-old Denis Malbasa in Sydney that authorities finally acted.

MARKO MALBASA: All the things that Denis do it, he do it very good.

He was a good boy, He was good, good player.

He was good friend, he was good son.

For me he was best.

EMMA ALBERICI: Marko and Suzana Malbasa migrated to Australia from the former Yugoslavia.

They fled the war-torn country seeking a better life, a safer life for their children.

But in the most tragic irony, their first-born, Denis, was killed by a portable goal post in their adopted country.

MARKO MALBASA: Denis said me, "Father, I go outside and play soccer with my friends.

After 15 minutes I think, one boy come in the restaurant, look at me, and said to me, "Marko, your son Denis fall down and mouth going blood, and ears."

EMMA ALBERICI: Did you ever worry when you were sending Denis to soccer that he was in a dangerous situation?

SUZANA MALBASA: I never think, never think, something like that.

I always be scared from cars, you know, I never, never, never think it happen on soccer field.

EMMA ALBERICI: While no inquest was held into the death of Denis Malbasa, the coroner made a recommendation to the NSW Minister for Fair Trading that standards for the manufacture and installation of portable goals be drafted to prevent similar deaths.

The guidelines, issued by Standards Australia in 2000, required portable goals to be anchored at nine points along the structure and that safety labels warning of the dangers be clearly attached to the front bar.

The standard that the coroner had intended would prevent another death on the soccer field was not widely disseminated to soccer clubs and local councils.

Indeed, anyone who even knew of its existence was asked to pay \$6 for a copy.

WILLIAM VERITY: Clearly, it's beyond debate that the guidelines didn't save India's life, so to that extent they were ineffective.

EMMA ALBERICI: Nine months after India Verity's death, there is still a glaring lack of awareness of the risks among councils and soccer clubs as we found at the local field just minutes from the Verity home in the NSW Southern Highlands.

EMMA ALBERICI: So they're meant to go like that in the ground and certainly you're meant to have more than two.

I'm not even pulling hard.

That's not two hands, full weight of my body.

EMMA ALBERICI: Two of the posts here have been left unattended and unanchored with no labels warning of the danger.

So much for those life saving guidelines.

We found similar instances of poorly secured soccer goals at a number of games throughout Sydney over the past few weeks, and five years after the death of Denis Malbasa here at the Serbia club, we were shocked to see the goal posts had still not been properly secured.

STEVE WILLIAMS, FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION, ENGLAND: We've carried out 220 tests in England over the last couple of years and found that in some instances there's nearly as many as one in two were actually seen to be not secured properly.

EMMA ALBERICI: Steve Williams is responsible for child safety at the Football Association, the peak soccer body in England.

There've been nine deaths in as many years in that country as a result of falling goal posts.

The FA recently commissioned this goal post safety leaflet.

Half a million copies of the pamphlet have been sent to clubs and local councils around the country to help raise awareness.

STEVE WILLIAMS: I think this year we'll see probably the highest amount of money that's been spent on this subject at any time.

EMMA ALBERICI: In stark contrast, it appears the Australian Soccer Association has done little to raise awareness of this issue.

Management of the ASA refused our requests for an interview.

A full coronial inquest is now pending into the death of India Verity.

CAROLINE VERITY: I would say that when the inquiry comes about there will be a number of options on the table.

As long as it is just absolutely ensured that there isn't the remotest chance of this happening again.

EMMA ALBERICI: What do you hope comes of telling your story?

WILLIAM VERITY: The short-term goal is just to let parents know that goal posts can and do kill children when they're unsecured.

It would be nice if someone had told us before India died, and made us aware of the dangers.

KERRY O'BRIEN: The statistics might not seem alarming but the facts of the case dealing with small children are.

Emma Alberici with that report.

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