

# A Free Journal Subscription: An experiment in futility?

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** We sought to change attitudes of physicians caring for adolescents and young adults with respect to the importance of injury prevention by providing free copies of a reputable, peer-reviewed journal for one year. We assumed that if the journal succeeded in increasing interest in the topic it would attract more subscribers.

**Methods:** Physicians treating adolescents or young adults were chosen from lists of family and adolescent physicians. We drew random samples from each list and of the 480 contacted, 220 agreed to participate. Subsequently, a randomly selected half of each sample received the journal for one year and the others did not. We used a one-page postal questionnaire to obtain information about interests in injury prevention and readership patterns before and after the study period.

**Results:** We found a statistically significant increase in awareness of the journal itself among the experimental group and a decline in awareness among controls. Fewer respondents in both groups agreed with the statement "a journal addressing injury prevention would be useful." All other questions addressing attitudes and behaviour change showed no significant changes.

**Conclusions:** The findings provide little reason to believe that offering a free subscription to a journal is a promising avenue for changing the attitudes and behaviour of physicians towards injury prevention. It is probable that for physicians treating patients in this age group, this conclusion also applies to other non-clinical topics and to many clinical topics.

**Key words:** *knowledge translation, injury prevention, adolescents and young adults, changing physician attitudes and behaviours.*

## INTRODUCTION

The prevention of injuries in children and adolescents involves a wide range of strategies. The most effective appears to be the introduction and promotion of safety devices such as seat belts, car seats, and bike helmets.<sup>1-3</sup> Strategies involving devices are usually termed 'passive' because they involve little or no effort.<sup>4</sup>

Less certain is the effectiveness of 'active' strategies aimed at changing behavior. Those involving the mass media, as in the case of a helmet promotion campaign in Seattle, appear promising<sup>5</sup> whereas others involving attempts by physicians to educate parents and children about safety measures have had mixed results.<sup>6-11</sup> In general, however, most studies of physician counseling that have been formally evaluated have been disappointing.<sup>6,12,13</sup> Nevertheless, many still believe that physicians are well placed to convey messages of this kind. To succeed, however, it is first necessary to convince physicians that topics like injury prevention are important goals in which clinicians should be engaged.<sup>14</sup>

The present study was intended to promote this view and thus modify the behavior of physicians regarding injury prevention in a high-risk, often neglected age group. The injury rate of adolescents and young adults (ages 15-24) in the U.S. (61.7/100,000) is second only to that of the elderly (ages 65-74) (73.2/100,000).<sup>15</sup> This is true not only for unintentional injuries such as motor vehicle crashes, but also for intentional injuries including suicide and homicide. Unfortunately, patients in this age group occupy a problematic place in most health care systems. Generally they are 'too old' for pediatricians and either too young or too healthy to be of interest to family physicians. Logically, they are the domain of adolescent medicine, but there are relatively few specialists in this field in Canada and the U.S. In light of these considerations it seemed logical to include specialists in family medicine and adolescent medicine in this study.

Admittedly, injury prevention may be viewed as a public health issue, not one that heavily involves clinicians.<sup>13</sup> Thus one challenge is to shift this view at least to the extent that clinicians see it as a shared responsibility. A related goal was to determine whether receiving a free subscription to a journal focused on this topic would result in new subscribers.

We hypothesized that exposure to current, peer-reviewed research in a scholarly form would influence the attitudes and behavior of physicians who treat this age group. Our primary goal was to determine if the receipt of a free, one-year subscription to Injury Prevention, a peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the prevention of injuries in all age groups, would stimulate interest in the topic among this group of physicians, and secondarily, to determine if this interest would generate new subscribers to the Journal.

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