

**Cords and Chains in window coverings - a Hidden Home Hazard
Information event, Brussels, 2 December 2010**

Statement by Mr. Tom Bourke, Head of Product Safety, National Consumer Agency, Ireland.

International Product Safety Week is an appropriate time to be highlighting the dangers associated with window blind cords and I welcome the opportunity to speak to you today to brief you on what we in Ireland are doing to eliminate the risks to children associated with corded window blind products.

This time of year is also a sad and poignant time for all of those families who have lost children, through accidents involving window cords, chains and beads. In Ireland alone over the past number of years, five children have died as a result of having been strangled by window blind cords, while in recent weeks deaths have occurred in the UK, Finland and Turkey. Yes, they died as a result of a tragic accident but perhaps they would still be with us here today if all of us had been more rigorous in our efforts to eliminate the problem and ensure that the standards were adequate and adhered to in the first place.

According to the preamble of the General Product Safety Directive, *The Community must contribute to protecting the health and safety of consumers. While it acknowledges that it is very difficult to adopt Community legislation for every product, which exists, or which may be developed; it goes on to state that the safety of products should be assessed taking into account all the relevant aspects; in particular the categories of consumers, which can be particularly vulnerable to the risks, posed by the products under consideration, in particular children and the elderly.*

Manufacturers must only put on the market products, which are safe. In addition, they must provide consumers with the necessary information in order to assess a product's inherent threat, particularly when this is not directly obvious, and take the necessary measures to avoid such threats. Unfortunately that does not appear to have happened in these cases and some manufacturers and suppliers are still not complying with the legal requirements.

The NCA has been actively working to tackle the issue of Window Blind Cord Safety over the past number of years.

Work done by the NCA includes:

- Informing consumers about the risks associated with looped cords on our websites and publications. We have produced consumer tips in relation to what to look out for when buying new blinds as well as tips on how to minimise risks posed by blinds already installed in homes. At our request, the Dept. Education sent copies of our leaflet to over 4,000 primary and secondary schools in Ireland.

- We have produced a brochure entitled ‘Consumer Guide to the Safety of Window Blinds’, which is also on our [website](#). This leaflet was prepared in cooperation with the NSAI.
- In August 2009 following entry into force of the new standard IS EN13120 the NCA wrote to 222 manufacturers and retailers informing them that a new standard had been introduced and reminding them of their obligations under EU product safety legislation and in particular that all relevant window blinds sold in Ireland must comply with the requirements of the new standard. Copies of our leaflets accompanied the letter. At the same time the leaflet was also sent to regional Health Promotion officers for general distribution. I regret to report that despite our efforts to publicise this new standard another child died in Ireland, some six months later, in March 2010.
- In May of this year the NCA carried out a nationwide market surveillance campaign to;
 - ✓ *Check if window blind manufacturers are complying with the relevant standard*
 - ✓ *Check if retailers and their fitters are selling and fitting products in accordance with the requirements of the standard and the general safety requirements of the GPSD*
 - ✓ *Educate and promote a greater awareness among manufacturers and retailers of their legal obligations.*

Our inspectors visited 97 retail outlets across fourteen counties. In summary, while a high level of compliance was noted in relation to providing warning notices and safety devices, the most significant areas where suppliers were found to be in breach of the safety standard included:

- Absence of instructions for correct installation
 - Absence of instructions for fitting safety devices
 - Absence of the manufacturer's details and
 - Most surprisingly and according to the industry itself, little or no training is provided to fitters.
- In response to that survey, in August 2010, the National Standards Authority of Ireland (NSAI) and the NCA called a meeting of all interested parties to discuss the results and to consider ways to eliminate the risks associated with window blind cords. At that meeting a number of window blind manufacturers and suppliers agreed, at our suggestion, to participate in a **National Committee on Internal Window Blind Safety**.

I am pleased to inform you that just this week we hosted the inaugural meeting of that Committee, the aims of which are to:

- ✓ Contribute to improving the European standard EN 13120, which is currently being revised by CEN, the European standardisation body, in response to concerns raised by this Agency and other member states,
- ✓ Develop a code of practice for the trade on window blind safety at national level, which will include curricula to train fitters in the installation of window blinds, which we know is a significant problem,

- ✓ Propose ways of educating manufacturers, suppliers, retailers and consumers about window blind safety and in particular tackle the problem of retrofitting old blinds

The Agency welcomes the decision of these companies to participate in this very important work and a representative of that committee Mr. Aaron O'Connell is with me here today.

While it is clear that market surveillance authorities have a very important role to play, ultimately the onus and legal responsibility is on industry to ensure that their products are safe. I hope therefore that, once and for all, that industry put consumers and in particular children first when working with CEN in the development of the revised standard.

While parents and guardians also have a clear responsibility to protect their children from harm and be extra vigilant with young children, the industry can significantly minimise the risk by engineering-out the problem.

I want to acknowledge however the consumer awareness activities that are being carried out by individual companies and by some industry organisations.

The Commission, the 27 member states and the various European consumer representatives bodies have unanimously concluded that the risks associated with window blinds are serious and must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

It is incumbent upon all of us therefore to ensure that the dangers associated with window blind cords are eliminated once and for all.