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July 15, 2009

HEAT-RELATED CHILD DEATHS A SIGNIFICANT CONCERN

Medical Examiner's Office says most deaths involved children left alone in a vehicle

(RICHMOND, Va.) Heat-related deaths among children who were confined in a motor vehicle are a significant child health and safety concern for the state, according to a new report from the Virginia Department of Health.

The report is by the Virginia State Child Fatality Review Team, which under the direction of the Chief Medical Examiner, analyzed 13 such deaths in Virginia that occurred between 1988 and 2003.

Earlier this month, a 13-month-old boy died in Richmond after being confined in a van for several hours. The case is now being investigated by the Chief Medical Examiner's Office as a heat-related death.

In its report, the review team found that the majority of child deaths occurred between the months of May and September, in conditions when air temperatures ranged from highs of 80 degrees F to 94 degrees F. The average temperature inside the motor vehicle in these instances was 124 degrees F, but climbed as high as 140 degree F.

“The report notes that most temperature increases inside a vehicle occur within the first 15 minutes after the doors and windows are shut. Now that we're approaching the hottest time of the summer, it is especially important for parents and child care providers to closely supervise children in and around motor vehicles and to never leave children alone in a vehicle, even for a few minutes,” said Karen Remley, M.D., MBA, Virginia's Health Commissioner.

Among the findings by the review team:

- all children whose deaths were reviewed in the study were under the age of 5;
- in most cases, death took place when a child was left unattended in a vehicle but in some instances, death occurred after a child gained access to a motor vehicle without the knowledge of the child care provider;
- most cases took place in a parking lot setting;
- the average length of time a child was left unattended was four hours, but the elapsed time ranged from 45 minutes to nine and one-half hours.

In its report, the review team made a number of recommendations for preventing such deaths including:

- that child care service organizations develop and distribute child passenger safety materials as part of their training programs;
- that businesses establish policies to prohibit people from leaving an unsupervised child on business property;
- that child safety seat manufacturers add labels to their products that warn of the dangers of temperature extremes and of leaving a child unattended in a motor vehicle and
- that motor vehicle and safety seat manufacturers develop technologies that would prevent children from being left unattended in a vehicle.

A complete list of the team's recommendations and its full report is available at <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/medExam/ChildFatality.htm>

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