MEMBER PROFILE

turning grief into action

After tragically losing their baby girl in a driveway accident, Peter and Emma Cockburn are working tirelessly to change legislation. Annie Reid reports.

Right: Higher door handles are included as part of the BCA proposal.

Proposed BCA amendments

The Building Code of Australia (BCA) is mandatory and is supported by legislation in every state/territory. The proposed inclusion in the code, regarding the internal access door between a garage or vehicle housing area, and the living space of a dwelling is that:

- it be a solid inward swinging door
- the door handle/latch at minimum 1500mm height above floor level
- the door to have a self-closer
- an electronic isolation cut-off switch to be installed between the automatic garage, and roller/panel lift door and the internal access door.

The proposed urban planning guidelines are:

- the fencing of driveways, and making a safe play area for kids, i.e. fencing off the backyard with self-closing pool latched side gates
- clear space at front fenceline to see kids on footpaths when reversing
- in gated estates with a communal driveway that feeds several houses, mirrors (as in shopping centre car parks) could be strategically used.

It is the stuff of parent's nightmares. About a year ago, Peter and Emma Cockburn's beautiful baby girl, Georgina, died tragically as a result of a home driveway accident.

The 15-month-old had crawled into the garage, while at the same time Peter was reversing his ute and tool trailer, returning home after work one afternoon.

To this day, they still have no idea how she got into the garage from the connecting living area.

'She crawled out there ... we don't know how the door came to be open and it was easy access for any toddler,' Emma said, in an article from *The Daily Telegraph*.

Working through their intense grief, sadness, guilt, anger and frustration, Emma and Peter logged online, wondering if other families had experienced the same tragedy. It turns out there was a name for it – low-speed vehicle run-over (LSVRO) – and that driveway fatalities are second only to backyard pool drownings for childhood deaths.

Recent statistics show that nearly three children a week – 150 per year – are run over in Queensland, and in the past five years on average, four die as a result of their injuries.

On a national level, there have been 85 deaths in children aged 0–5 years old between 2000 and 2010. But there is no set database or system for separating and recording these accidents separately from pedestrian or on-road accidents. Nor is there a standard classification for LSVRO on the coroner's database.

'We had to do something about this,' Emma explains. 'Not everyone's got a pool, but everyone's got a garage.'

There is also nothing in the Building Code of Australia/National Construction Code (BCA/NCC) that references safe access and the barriers between garages and the living spaces of houses. The couple's response is a three-pronged strategy for the public to use as a whole package:



- **Physical environment:** Looking carefully at housing and driveway design, separate living spaces and play areas of houses from driveways and vehicle housing areas; working on BCA changes to reflect this.
- **Vehicle design:** Creating awareness about rear visibility in vehicles, and working towards rear vision cameras as a standard feature in all vehicles, through Australian Design Rules.
- **Education:** Continually raising awareness through their website, foundation and campaigns to enhance the public's knowledge and change attitudes.

For the building industry, the couple's proposed changes to the BCA are the most relevant (as outlined in the box at left).

The couple has drawn from extensive recommended research to create their series of proposals, which they have now submitted to the Australian Building Codes Board (ABCB).



Above: The Cockburns have established the Georgina Josephine Foundation in memory of their little girl.

They have also undertaken extensive research on what these measures might cost in the real world.

For individual builders and clients, the cost of installing a self-closer to an existing home's door would be around $50–$250. For a new door, including the latch, self-closer and removal of the old door, Peter estimates the cost to be between $300–$500, depending on labour rates etc. And a roller door cut-off switch would cost about $400, including switch components and installation.

As the managing director of his own business, CBN Building, Peter is well placed to do the sums.

'It's not adding that much extra cost, and it's very simple. The cost goes back to the client anyway,' he says.

'Because I am a builder, I know that it is *that* simple. It doesn't cost as much as a child's funeral.'

Peter and Emma are hoping to inspire the industry to start thinking about how individual builders can not only communicate the dangers to their clients, but also to make changes themselves.

Peter's message, as a builder, is: 'We *can* start to implement these changes in our own homes, and that of the clients we build for.' Peter has also identified this issue as part of the professional responsibility of builders, and with that a potential risk of liability if reasonable efforts are not made to ensure safe homes and driveways are created for their clients.

They already have the support of Hotondo Homes and its 90-strong franchisees, and are working with a number of associations, including Kidsafe, local councils and are spreading their message on radio and television current affairs programs, as well as print media outlets.

For example, Kidsafe includes an Online Safety Demonstration House on its website, while *The Daily Telegraph*'s Check, See, Turn the Key campaign is supporting Peter and Emma's driveway safety efforts.

Their latest initiative is a new reversing system for cars, which is launching soon in Australia.

But while it seems easy enough to raise a handle on a door to the garage – thus preventing a toddler from opening it – a far harder task is to change mindsets.

'A lot of it is to do with attitude. People think "it won't happen to me", but it could. It happened to us,' Peter says.

'We *can* start to implement these changes in our own homes, and that of the clients we build for'

For now, the two are continuing to work hard, raising awareness and furthering their efforts through the Georgina Josephine Foundation.

Emma concludes: 'We hope the building industry as a whole will help to put these systems in place, to assist in what is one of society's greatest duties of care – the health and wellbeing of our children.' H