

# Bringing Research to LIFE

## Upcoming Events

### New Member of Executive Team



Civil engineering professor James Blatz was recently appointed Associate Vice-President (Partnerships) within the Office of the Vice-President (Research and International). Read more on page 2.

### Join the Discussion about Racism

The speaker series **Visionary Conversations** is back this fall for another round of thought-provoking discussions. Join President and Vice-Chancellor David Barnard, along with the University of Manitoba’s trailblazing researchers and alumni, for the second season launch in September during Homecoming.

#### We Need to Talk About Racism

Wednesday, September 12, 2012

Robert B. Schultz Theatre,  
St. John’s College,  
Fort Garry Campus

Reception in Galleria: 6:30 to 7 pm  
Sponsored by the Alumni Association Inc.  
Panel Discussion: 7 to 8:30 pm

#### Featured speakers:

- Phil Fontaine (Alumni) – former National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Owner of Ishkonigan
- Emma Laroque – Professor, Native Studies, Faculty of Arts
- Lori Wilkinson – Associate Dean/Professor, Sociology, Faculty of Arts
- Andrew Woolford – Associate Professor, Sociology, Faculty of Arts

RSVP to:  
Visionary\_Conversations@umanitoba.ca

## Not all fun and games

### Emergency room doctor says play structures can pose dangers for kids

BY KATIE CHALMERS-BROOKS  
For The Bulletin

Keeping little kids safe is a never-ending job for most parents. They grab small hands before crossing the street, make sure food is cut into manageable bites, protect delicate skin from the sun before heading to the playground.

But how much thought do moms and dads give to the play equipment their kids climb? These structures put small ones several metres in the air yet often have few barriers to keep them from falling to the hard ground below.

Faculty of Medicine professor and expert in child safety Lynne Warda says parents need to take a more critical look at play structures and even avoid them all together. Every year, more than 28,000 children across Canada end up in emergency departments after suffering a significant injury from playground equipment, Warda says. She sees some of them at the Children’s Hospital where she works as an emergency pediatrician.

“You don’t need to be at the top of a play structure to have fun. Families can have a lot more fun at ground level playing together,” says Warda. “We’re educating parents and childcare providers, encouraging them to choose alternatives to play equipment.”

She says families are better off returning to the basics: running around, jumping, or exploring, which not only helps develop a child’s motor skills and imagination but requires the parents to be more involved.

The most common playground injuries are from falls. According to the Canadian Paediatric Society, playground deaths are rare and almost always caused by strangulation. Kids wearing scarves or drawstrings are at greater risk since the clothing gets caught on equipment, typically at the top of a slide. A child’s head can also get stuck in openings, such as between ladder rungs. This has happened when kids are wearing bike helmets, the Society warns.

Parents must do their part to reduce risk but children can easily fall off structures if knocked by another child. Warda says equipment should be lower to the ground, have better guard rails and keep in mind the age appropriateness of the user. Covering the ground below with pea gravel or sand is far preferred over cement or grass but requires maintenance to keep it from getting packed.

The Canadian Standard Association sets guidelines for the design of the structure and the cushion factor of the surrounding ground surface, but they are voluntary and not necessarily followed in public spaces or homeowners’ backyards.

While unsafe equipment still exists, the number of injuries has steadily declined over recent decades



Photo by Daniel Gwozdz

**Researcher Lynne Warda investigates ways to make playgrounds safer in Manitoba, and how to get more kids to wear helmets and lifejackets.**

as more playground designs incorporate greater safety features and more natural components. A pair of slides built into a hill at Assiniboine Park’s Nature Playground is a good example, Warda says, since the design eliminates the possibility of kids falling from a great height.

Warda and the Manitoba Coalition for Active and Safe Kids are leading a provincial campaign and research project funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada intended to reduce head injuries, fractures, and drowning among local children. This is part of a national commitment for reducing injuries in the most popular sports and recreation injury activities for children and youth.

“I see this every shift that I go in,” says Warda, who splits her time between the hospital, community, and classroom. “These are preventable injuries, either preventable by the child, the family or the community in some way.”

Her team went to Manitoba beaches to find out whether or not parents are keeping their young ones within an arm’s reach when around water, as is recommended. More than half of individuals caring for kids age one to four were not. “Not surprisingly, a lot of infants and toddlers were not closely supervised,” says Warda, a mother of two.

She’d like to see more preschoolers wearing life jackets while at the beach, on a dock or in a boat. This summer, communities in Manitoba and across Canada will be encouraged to set up kiosks at beaches to lend lifejackets—and in doing so perhaps prevent a tragedy. More toddlers drown annually than die

in motor vehicle collisions, Warda notes.

Her team has also monitored helmet use in Winnipeg over the last 16 years at nearly 200 public places like parks and schools and found that a growing number of cyclists wear them—about 40 per cent. This number is higher for kids and lower for teens. Realizing that children in low-income areas are the least likely to wear helmets prompted Warda and the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority injury prevention program IMPACT to target their efforts to specific neighbourhoods. Donning a helmet can mean the difference between a minor concussion and a serious brain injury, she says.

Researching best safety practices early on in her career got Warda thinking about how safe the hospital environment was for kids in her care. She researched pediatric hazards in healthcare facilities and created a check list for staff to apply. They took medications and cleaning chemicals out of rooms. They removed blind cords to avoid the risk of children becoming entangled; they upgraded all child beds to keep youngsters from becoming entrapped, and added a bubble-like feature to the top of cribs to prevent toddlers from crawling out.

“We were making all these recommendations to families for their homes and I looked around at the ‘homes’ around the hospital and realized there were pretty common hazards that we would tell parents to correct that we had at the hospitals,” says Warda. “Times have changed. We just know a lot more than we did 40 years ago.”