

Driving Under the Influence - It's Our Responsibility - 19 June 2010

When I was a surgeon I was often asked by a dying patient "how much longer have I got?" My stock reply was "I don't know, in fact I don't even know how much longer I have got; I might get killed driving home tonight". 

Think for a moment about the families of those who are killed by drunk drivers on their way home. Spare a thought for the paramedics, ambulance officers and police who have to pull the bodies out of the wreckage. Consider the aftermath of funeral arrangements and the lifelong grief and loss for the affected families. Also consider the fact that for every person killed there are 20 seriously injured.

And yet today, despite all we know about the carnage from drink driving there are more than 81,000 who are arrested annually in Australia for driving under the influence of alcohol, drugs or both. They obviously never even consider the possibility that they might be killed or that they might kill or maim innocent people. This extraordinary figure equates to over 200 people every day on average being arrested for driving under the influence. Even if we accept one estimate that for every one arrested an equal number of people go undetected, it is clear we have an enormous problem despite the somewhat paradoxical fact that the number of road deaths is decreasing relative to population.

What we do know is that about one third of all road deaths are alcohol or drug related; the rest are attributed to speed, fatigue and road faults or a combination of them all. The most worrying feature however is that one third of the people arrested for driving under the influence have had previous convictions for the same offence and many were driving without licenses.

Federal, State and Local Governments and their agencies have been working diligently for years to bring home to people the dangers of driving under the influence, as have a large number of organizations ranging from the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, Insurance Companies and voluntary public interest groups. Indeed the offence of driving under the influence was first introduced in Victoria in 1909!

There have been a number of inquiries into this matter over recent years, and the suggestions fall roughly into five categories - deterrence, education, motor vehicle modification, road improvement and better public transport options.

The strategy with most popular support is deterrence. Strong media campaigns, strong penalties including prison terms, loss of licenses and now even the impounding of vehicles in some places. Public naming and shaming of convicted drunk drivers is also under consideration in some jurisdictions.

Compulsory blood testing of all drivers who attend hospital for examination or treatment as a result of a motor vehicle accident is another strategy. There has been advocacy for lowering the blood-alcohol limit to zero, but as we know this has little political given the lack of community support, as it is seen as either punishing all for the sins of some or for some, as an infringement on our right to drink.

Under the education strategy the promotion of designated driver programs, as well as the better availability of public transport and urban planning to include safe pedestrian pathways has been a feature. Whilst motor vehicle modifications include the incorporation of an alcohol ignition inter-lock scheme particularly for high risk

drink drivers, is becoming an area of real potential, particularly for repeat offenders.

I am sure that many in the community would have thought that surely by now everyone understands the horrible and often tragic risks from driving under the influence. But human nature is far more complex, with many believing that their individual skills and knowledge afford them some special exemption from all the evidence. It is for others not me is the attitude that seems to prevail. Without some technology to stop any of us from being able to drive under the influence our governments, police and health authorities will continue to struggle to overcome this problem.

In the end, it comes down to self responsibility and self control. We all have the right to enjoy ourselves with outings and good company but we do not have the right to put the lives of our fellow citizens at such risk because we think it is alright to be driving under the influence. The roads are already a dangerous enough place without that happening.

As someone who has seen the tragic consequences of many road crashes involving alcohol I would ask everyone to stop before you ever even think of driving under the influence or letting anyone you know do so.

Don't forget it's your life that is on the line, and you owe it to your family and others to stop that door-knock from happening - "How much longer have you got?" – Well it may be shorter than you think.

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