

IMO



IRISH MEDICAL
ORGANISATION


BMA
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JOINT BRIEFING DOCUMENT : ROAD SAFETY
BRITISH MEDICAL ASSOCIATION (NI) AND THE IRISH MEDICAL ORGANISATION
Presented at a reception for MEPs and Journalists in the European Parliament
on 22nd January 2007

Individual countries in Europe have recognised the impact of road accidents in their mortality and morbidity figures. Although there have been improvements in some countries the overall impact of road death and illness is still significant.

One of the ways of measuring this impact is by the use of potential years of life lost (PYLL). This weights the causes of death on an age basis so that people dying young from a condition will have more impact. Given the preponderance of road deaths, particularly amongst young men in their late teens and twenties, it can be seen that road accidents in Europe have the sort of impact of a single condition not seen since the tuberculosis epidemics in the 1940s.

There is evidence that the impact of road accidents is often worse in border areas between European states. A recent European-funded survey by CAWT (Co-operation and Working Together¹) has illustrated this in the border counties in Ireland.

The IMO and the BMA have policies on various aspects of road safety which we have been discussing with our respective governments for some years. This briefing paper highlights just three of our joint top priorities and recommendations. We are requesting that the European Parliament adopts these recommendations and takes them forward on an international basis.

JOINT PRIORITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. To lower the permitted blood alcohol level when driving, in both the UK and Ireland, from 80mg/100ml to 50mg; this is now widely accepted as the EU standard, given the number of countries which have adopted it. This should also be accompanied by improved legislative powers to increase evidential breath testing; an increase in the rate of enforcement for drink-driving offences; plus public awareness campaigns, such as those which currently happen on a cross-border basis in Ireland.

Within the European Union there are 21 countries with a 50mg/100ml blood alcohol concentration or less, namely:
Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden.

Only the UK, Ireland, Luxembourg and Malta have an 80mg/100ml limit.

A recent study *Alcohol in Fatal Road Crashes in Ireland - November 2006*, Population Health Directorate Health Service Executive, showed:

- There were 301 fatal crashes killing 335 persons in 2003 in Ireland;
- Alcohol was a factor in 110 (37%) of fatal crashes;
- The aim of the study was to identify the contribution alcohol makes to fatal road crashes in Ireland;
- All files on fatal crashes in 2003 in the National Traffic Bureau of the Garda Siochana were examined;
- 90% of the drivers whose alcohol was a contributory factor were male;
- Where alcohol was measured in killed drivers, 45% were over the legal limit;
- Alcohol related fatal road crashes are 3 times more likely to occur on Saturday, Sunday or Monday;
- 22 (50%) of crashes that occurred on Mondays were before 8.00am – of these 12 (55%) were alcohol related;
- Alcohol consumed by pedestrians was a factor in 24 (38%) of the pedestrian deaths. Pedestrians with positive blood alcohol levels were 8 times more likely to be killed between 10.00pm on Friday night to 8.00am on Monday morning.

CONCLUSIONS:

- Any amount of alcohol is a risk
- A driver does not have to be over the limit to be at risk
- Weekends, late at night and early mornings high risk
- 37% of fatal road crashes related to alcohol
- Pedestrians with alcohol a serious risk to themselves

In 2005 there were 276 road traffic accidents in Northern Ireland in which the driver was affected by alcohol consumption, with 529 casualties, including 24 killed and 95 seriously injured.

Reducing the drink-drive limit would lead to fewer deaths and serious injuries on our roads each year.²

2. The IMO and BMA(NI) are concerned at the influence of drugs, (both illegal and prescribed), on driving skills and recommend that:
 - Governments should raise the awareness of this issue with the public and educate them as to the potential impact of drugs on driving ability.
 - The public needs to be made more aware that the side effects of certain prescribed drugs can affect ability to drive.
 - Governments should ensure speedier and more specific and co-ordinated research in order to establish appropriate drug testing devices.
3. The BMA and the IMO believe that another recommendation which would improve the safety of pedestrians and other vulnerable road users is the banning of 'Bull Bars' from all vehicles.

A European Directive (DIRECTIVE 2005/66/EC) was agreed in October 2005, which sets out performance requirements for Frontal Protection Systems (FPS), including bull bars, fitted as original equipment to vehicles up to 3.5 tonnes maximum mass and FPS supplied as after market accessories. The Directive requires that, from 25 May 2007, all such FPS must comply with the requirements of the Directive, so as to reduce the risk of serious injury to pedestrians and other vulnerable road users if struck by the front of a vehicle fitted with an FPS. Existing FPS already fitted to vehicles will not be affected.

Modern road vehicles are safer than their predecessors, both for drivers and passengers. However, much of this safety improvement is negated by the fixing of external bumpers. They are not only potentially lethal to small children and damaging to adults when involved in a collision with such vehicles but often reduce the safety affect for drivers and passengers.

Apart from agricultural vehicles, there is no requirement for these additions to road vehicles. Our two organisations want to see bull bars banned as fittings on vehicles and until such times as this happens, we believe the EU should bring pressure to bear on motor insurance companies to either increase premiums or refuse to cover vehicles which have non-factory fitted bull bars added³.

¹ Cooperation and Working Together is a cross border body, formed in 1992 when the North Eastern and North Western Health Boards in the Republic of Ireland (known as the Health Service Executive as of 1 Jan 2005) and the Southern and Western Health and Social Services Boards in Northern Ireland agreed to cooperate in improving the health and social well being of their resident populations. To underpin this cooperation, the four Health Boards entered into a formal accord known as the Ballyconnell Agreement. <http://www.cawt.com>

² Annex 2 - The estimated effect on casualties of lowering the legal alcohol limit to 50mg, Combating Drink-Driving – next steps, DETR, February 1998

³ "That this Meeting strongly urges the Government to ban the fitting of bull bars on motor vehicles.", BMA Annual Representative Meeting 199