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Road Deaths Climb to Global Epidemic Proportions

By Zack Gross

While you might be frustrated with Manitobans who don't use their turn signal or don't switch on their headlights or who drive too fast (or too slow), you may not have realized that driving behaviour ranks up there with hunger, disease and war as a global killer.

This year, the World Health Organization (WHO) of the United Nations is focusing on traffic accidents as one of the world's greatest human safety challenges. Beginning last month, a global campaign is underway to reduce injury and death by automobile mishap, which currently claims well over one million lives annually worldwide and causes 20 to 50 million injuries, many of them disabling.

Vehicular crashes are the leading cause of "death by injury" in today's world, while road deaths rank number nine overall. Death by traffic "accident" (experts say there isn't such a thing as a traffic accident because they all have causes!) is the second leading cause of death among young people, and third leading cause of death among the 30 to 44 year age bracket.

Ninety percent of road mishaps occur in lower income countries, which don't have the resources to implement and enforce safety standards and don't have the health systems to cope with such carnage. While our system of health and vehicle insurance in Manitoba, for example, helps to cover the loss of property, health and work time due to automobile crashes, most individuals, families and countries suffer terrible losses of

revenue and security. WHO estimates that 2% of some countries' GDP is lost each year due to road deaths and injuries.

The WHO's response to the global road traffic challenge is, similarly to when it deals with health issues, to emphasize prevention. Thus, they are confronting the major risk factors involved, that is the causes of "accidents": driving under the influence of alcohol, speeding, not using seatbelts and child restraints, poor roads, unsafe vehicles, poor road safety measures and poor emergency health services.

Canada, while not a poor country, faces many of the above issues too. While penalties are becoming more severe for drinking and driving, it still remains a major problem that causes the deaths of tragic numbers of young people. Manitoba, meanwhile, has one of the worst provincial records in Canada for seatbelt use, second from the bottom to Newfoundland. With shrinking government budgets, our roads are disintegrating in urban, rural and highway situations.

In the majority world (the poor), conditions are much worse as governments and people don't have – or haven't allocated – the resources to make the roads safer. Even at night, my experience is that cars are often driven without working headlights. Formal driving lessons and exams often only apply to the wealthy. The boxes of pick-up trucks are often packed with dozens of standing occupants while the vehicle careens along washed out excuses for roads.

Through both education and enforcement, it is hoped that the human driving record will be improved. For instance, the Chinese government is now launching a campaign to promote seat belt installation and use. In Mexico, road safety educational materials are being included with the textbooks of 24 million school children.

In Nigeria, all commercial drivers will be compelled to have their eyes checked and, while this is being done, they will be lectured on safe driving. Many countries and regions are holding conferences, running poster contests, issuing commemorative stamps and even opening memorial gardens and monuments for the families of traffic victims.

For the first time in history, the United Nations General Assembly focused on the auto safety issue last month. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan led the discussion by stating that “the key to successful prevention lies in the commitment of all relevant sectors, public and private – health, transport, education, finance, legislators, manufacturers and the media – to make road safety happen”.

Other meetings are scheduled to bring all parties together to address the growing toll of death and injuries on the world’s roads. This month, national Ministers of Health are invited to the 57th World Health Assembly to discuss and approve a UN draft resolution that, if passed, would give member states a clear mandate and a set of strategies to tackle this problem.

Other people’s driving habits are a topic that generates passion in all of us. We find ourselves muttering about the unacceptable behaviour of the guy or gal beside us while trying to justify our own transgressions (driving is just a metaphor for life!). But little do we know that traffic death and injury and the human and economic costs associated with them have reached global epidemic proportions. World leaders are beginning to take action as carnage on the road begins to rival tragedy on the battlefield.

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