Drinking Habits and Vehicle Use

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INTRODUCTION

The wheel was man's greatest invention, until he got behind it.

There is no doubt that mankind has always had difficulty with alcohol and transport. Those of you who know your Bible, will remember that Noah had considerable navigational difficulties with the Ark as a result of taking too much wine. But, until the internal combustion engine arrived on the scene alcohol was not considered, nor even understood, as any sort of a problem. I think as a result of this, the rules pertaining to a horse and cart were subsequently applied to a motor car with disastrous results we call the road toll, now common to all motorised nations.

I find it quite fascinating that, firstly, in all countries afflicted with this problem, alcohol has been documented far more fully than any other factor, and secondly, that all the massive amount of evidence involving alcohol as a factor is all one way — that the mixture of alcohol and gasoline is dynamite. Despite all this we still have nitpickers querying that there is a problem.

Yet, here we are with the Seventh Conference in just over 25 years, still talking, arguing and discussing — and this despite the fact that a drunk driver is a drunk driver whether arrested by police in San Francisco, Melbourne or Stockholm, at a blood alcohol level between .210% and .220%; pretty narrow limits you will agree.

SOME INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

International comparisons are difficult because of different laws and police practices and even ways of keeping figures. But, I think it most important to remember that all people on this earth are human beings reacting in a similar fashion to the ingestion of alcohol. The drunken individual is a figure of fun for the cartoonist of all races — for if human beings don't treat drunkenness as humorous then it becomes most serious and uncomfortable.

There are some questions which worry one. Why does Israel have such a serious crash problem when the Jewish people use alcohol so wisely in general. However I have not seen a series of post-mortem alcohols on Israeli traffic crash victims. Sweden has the relatively low incidence of high alcohol levels at post-mortems in its drivers of 15%, whereas the U.S.A. and Australia would be closer to 50%. I find this fascinating in view of Lester Ross' demonstration at the Sixth Conference that the various changes in the Swedish alcohol traffic laws over the years had not affected the road toll.3

On the other hand one must recognise that the practical Swedes have been preaching against alcohol on the roads since the nineteen twenties — in Australia being able to imbibe

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a Victoria Police Surgeon.
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20, 30 or God knows how many beers and still be upright, is admired behaviour, while what I can only call a beer pot, that disgusting abdominal adiposity in young male Australians of 20-25 years, is apparently a status symbol. And please remember we are dealing with what is predominantly a male problem — the female seems to have much more sense when driving.

We must recognise, as Michael Henderson has noted, that in all countries with bad traffic crash records and a high alcohol consumption, one of the functions of the highway system is to facilitate the movement of drivers who have been drinking. One of the functions of private motoring is the furtherance of social occasions and it is rare today for a social gathering not to rely, in part, for its success on the easy availability of alcoholic beverages. It is interesting that the hard headed world of business and commerce now tends to have its working Conferences at breakfast. After all few people have a bottle of brandy for breakfast. It is also an interesting facet of all developed countries that if, in such a country of 13 000 000 people, poliomyelitis killed 3500 people, heads and governments would roll.

PUBLIC IGNORANCE OF ALCOHOL’S CONTRIBUTION TO THE ROAD TOLL

It has frequently been noted that communities are appallingly ignorant of the contribution made by alcohol to road traffic crashes, of the amounts drunk by victims and offenders, and even the significance of the alcohol numbers.

What are some of the factors leading to this appalling ignorance?

1. It goes without saying that the liquor industry everywhere employs a large number of ordinary law abiding people, pays enormous taxes and always has a most considerable influence or lobbying power with politicians.

2. We are all subject to folklore, mores and customs; politicians, judges, magistrates, lawyers, doctors, mechanics, tinkers and sailors, drink in accord with those customs. Heavy drinking is the accepted folklore, so many drinkers quietly and happily become alcoholic without recognition.

3. If Father arrives home boozed every night in his car — an injury producing crash is a rare statistical event — then son regards this as normal. There can not be in these circumstances any recognition that ‘tanking up and taking off is sick’, in Klein and Waller’s phrase. This lack of recognition is deep.

4. The media in all its forms often ignores the problem either because it’s not news or considered news, a couple dead in a head-on crash would maybe rate a mention but six or seven dead in one crash would. These attitudes of course, must be affected by the influence of the large advertisers and even the personal drinking prejudices of reporter, sub-editor or editor.

5. The effects of the media, advertisers, tyre, petrol and automotive companies, and the liquor trade have reached the stage where there are two badges of being an adult — drinking and driving — and two only. Driving today means a driver’s licence and this means driving a high powered car fast.

6. The legal profession’s technicalities, conservatism and the incredible importance put on the so called civil liberty of drinking and driving, I am sure are counter productive. I also am not sure just how the motor car got into the criminal field. After all no-one, or at least very few people, start out drinking with the idea of killing a few people. The legal technicalities we meet surrounding breath tests in Victoria, and the compartmentalisation of offences by law and police do not help. Thus to hear a prosecutor in a drunk driving case say ‘nothing known’ when asked if there are prior convictions, when the man might have 10 arrests for
drunk and disorderly and other street offences not connected with a motor car makes one's hackles rise.

7. The insurance and assurance professions have, I think, in Australia, been very dilatory about this problem. They have been first rate with seat belts but conspicuous by their silence on alcohol — no educational effort at all and only slowly have they started to realise what alcohol is costing them — particularly in the young adult male. However, many insurance executives are good drinkers, they often have to defend legally many bad drunk drivers to avoid large payouts, and police in Victoria have used the excuse that if they arrest an offender, the innocent driver won't be recompensed. With comprehensive car insurance the premiums seem to just go higher. Questions relating to alcohol on the proposal form are virtually non-existent and they don't seem concerned by the difference in risk indicated by those people arrested for drinking and driving.

In fact apart from Victoria, Statutes in other states demand that insurers pay the repair bills of drinking driving clients, when B.A.C. convictions are recorded following crashes.

8. There has perhaps been some justification for the appalling ignorance of the significance of the blood or breath alcohol numbers. We have lacked the technology, but this gap could well be very shortly closed by the new generation of breath test instruments.

9. Finally the formal scientific approach in the evaluation of alcohol countermeasures is still having difficulties. With the introduction of compulsory seat belt wearing we were fortunate enough to have a nine month control period in which Victoria was the only state with the law operative. The point was made.

With random testing while we were unfortunate enough to be denied a preliminary survey, Victoria is again the only State with the law in operation.

Early results are fascinating in that overall 2.4% of drivers are showing alcohol levels, the average alcohol level of injured drivers has dropped and there has been a change in driver casualties on Friday and Saturday night not noted anywhere else. It appears that the sale of packaged beer consumed at home has soared.

The final results of the Victorian experiment of random testing will be awaited with interest.

REFERENCES

