How To Deal With The Impact Of Medicinal Drug Abuse on Driver Safety?

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Abstract
Driving is a complex task requiring psychomotor skill, information processing, sound judgement and reaction time. Many prescribed medications affect the skills required for safe driving in a variety of ways. Recent driving research studies have indicated the increasing prevalence of prescribe medication in driving crashes. The benzodiazepines and amphetamines both alone and in combination with alcohol are most frequently cited. Generally when crashes occur these drugs are found to be present in levels far and above therapeutic doses indicating abuse of prescribed medications. Globally most countries attempt to deal with this problem through a variety of prevention strategies including public service advertising, package insert warnings, and pictographs that indicate a driving hazard. Only a few countries of the world [e.g. Belgium, Germany, Sweden] actually have laws that allow police officers to test for prescribed-medication drug abuse, and to prosecute drivers found to be under the influence of such drugs. Initial reports indicate these laws are working well and may be one effective way of dealing with the problem. Strategic policy ideas emanating from the ICADTS working group on illegal drugs and drug abuse will be discussed with regard to legislative, law-enforcement and research initiatives to better deal with drivers abusing prescribed medications.

Discussion
This paper attempts to summarize the activities of the ICADTS working group on “Illegal Drugs and Driving" with regard to strategies to deal with the misuse of prescription medications. The goal of the working group was to identify what is known about driving under the influence of illegal drugs and the misuse of prescription drugs, the scope of the problem, to provide a discussion of the current status of political, legislative, and law enforcement efforts, and to make recommendations for new strategic initiatives and future research.
Working Group Discussions and Recommendations

A meeting of the working group was held in Bethesda, Maryland USA in January 2000. Participants included working group members, invited guests from the White House Drug Policy Office, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, and a number of other ICADTS members. Representatives from the USA, Belgium, France, Germany, Norway, and Scotland made presentations summarizing activities within their respective nations. Presentations were also made summarizing the activities of various political entities involved in the "Illicit Drugs and Driving" issues in Europe.

A major portion of the working group meeting was spent discussing available data, and identifying information/data still needed to make policy decisions. Discussions focused on developing recommendations for innovative initiatives to respond to the growing problem of driving under the influence of illegal drugs and the misuse of prescribed medications.

The committee developed specific recommendations for governments to consider as strategic initiatives for reducing the use of illegal drugs and the misuse of prescription medications by drivers. These recommendations follow:

Recommendation - -The consensus of the working group members was that, considering the complexity of individual differences in the behavioral and pharmacological response to drugs, per se laws are a reasonable strategic initiative but one that needs further evaluation.

Recommendation -- The consensus of the working group was that increasing penalties for individuals driving under the influence of both alcohol and drugs was a legislative initiative worthy of consideration.

Recommendation -- The consensus of the working group was that since the combination of alcohol and other drug generally produces increased behavioral impairment that the application of a lower BAC standard for DUI in the presence of illegal drugs was a reasonable legislative initiative.

Recommendation -- The consensus of the working group was that Administrative License Revocation was a strategy worth evaluating with drugged drivers.

Recommendation -- The consensus of the working group was that legislative initiatives to couple license re-granting with treatment and surveillance for individuals convicted of drugged driving was a reasonable initiative. This would be a strong recommendation for commercial drivers.

Recommendation – Developing National Training programs on drugged-driving for police is an important law enforcement priority. Training and Motivating Police to "think" drugs as well as alcohol in DUI enforcement is critical considering the global prevalence of illegal drug use. These programs should develop documented protocols for “profiles of drugs of abuse symptoms” which can be used as evidence in court.
Recommendation -- The consensus of the working group was that compulsory testing was an important strategic initiative that police could use to increase detection of drugged drivers. Legislation could be enacted requiring compulsory testing in the following situations [listed in a continuum]:

- When driver fails standard field sobriety test but passes breath alcohol test
- When police officer finds illegal drugs in the vehicle or on the driver
- Whenever there is an accident or personal injury
- Whenever there is a fatality
- Reasonable suspicion testing

Recommendation -- It was the consensus of the working group that governments should expend resources to education their nations about drugged driving. The following target groups and suggested ways in which to reach these groups were recommended.

- Public
  - Traffic schools
- Major public service advertising campaigns on Drugs, Medicines & Driving [CD-ROMs, brochure, public leaflets / Pictograms such as those used in France] for:
  - Law Enforcement / Judiciary
    - Police Awareness About Drugs
    - Drug recognition expert training program, special courses
    - Training for judges and prosecutors
- Government Officials
- Employers – via business communications
- Insurance Industry – to their insured
- Treatment Providers (Occupational Health Professionals)
- Pharmacists / Physicians /ER/Trauma Physicians & their Organizations
- Community Grass Roots Approach
- Young users

Recommendation -- It was the consensus of the working group that it is critical for nations around the world to invest in drugged driving research as the scope of the problem has clearly outgrown our knowledge base. The problem of drugged driving appears to be growing, not waning, and it is imperative to improve our scientific and technical knowledge to provide sound basis for new law. The working group recommended the following areas as important for the near future:

- Epidemiological Studies on the prevalence of illegal drug use in drivers
- Better Performance Tests [Psychometric Battery] for use at the roadside
- Improved drug detection devices for use at the roadside
- Basic Psychopharmacology examining drug effects on behavior
- Research linking drug treatment with driving records
- Evaluations of “Use/Lose” Laws
• Evaluations of commercial driver testing programs
• ER and Trauma Center Studies – Linking drug use with accidents
• Global Link/Exchange Countries’ Drugged Driver Data
• Standardize procedures and protocols for medical examination; procedures used by national forensic labs  Studies on causative role of drugs (BEL)
• Evaluation of existing measures [ie Concentration – effect, cut-offs]
• Strengthen knowledge base of traffic hazards connected to drug use, and the magnitude of the problem
• Develop database for effective primary and secondary prevention

Reference: