Road Traffic Injuries, a Neglected Global Public Health Problem

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Worldwide, nearly 1.2 million people are killed in road traffic crashes every year and 20 million to 50 million more are injured or disabled. These injuries account for 2.1% of global mortality and 2.6% of all DALYs lost. Low- and middle-income countries account for about 85% of the deaths and 90% of the DALYs lost annually. Without appropriate action, by 2020, road traffic injuries are predicted to be the third leading contributor to the global burden of disease ahead of other health problems such as malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS.

For everyone killed, injured or disabled by a road traffic crash there are countless others deeply affected. Many families are driven into poverty by the expenses of prolonged medical care, loss of a family breadwinner, or the added burden of caring for the disabled. In addition, the economic cost of road traffic crashes is enormous. Globally it is estimated that US$ 518 billion is spent on road traffic crashes with low- and middle-income countries accounting for US$ 65 billion – more than these countries receive in development assistance.

Since 2000, WHO has stepped up its response in this area by firstly developing a 5-year strategy for road traffic injury prevention and following this by dedication World Health Day 2004 to Road Safety. At the global event held in Paris on the 7th April 2004, WHO and the World Bank launched the joint World report on road traffic injury prevention. This report emphasizes the role of public health in the prevention of road traffic injuries. It offers countries six recommendations for action on road safety at a national level.

The report calls for a “systems approach” to road safety which looks at the system as a whole and also the interaction between the three elements of the system – namely, the roads, vehicles, and road users in order to identify where there is potential for intervention. In particular, the systems approach recognises that humans make mistakes and as such a safe road traffic system is one that accommodates their weaknesses.

The report further emphasises that road safety is a multisectoral issue which requires shared responsibility between governments, industry, nongovernmental organizations and international agencies.