

Alcohol and Pedestrians

Sir

Bedford et al¹ have recently added to the strong existing evidence that a substantial part of the pedestrian accident problem arises from intoxicated pedestrians. We have recently reviewed² this, and would like to add three points. The first is that among pedestrian fatalities having a positive BAC (blood alcohol concentration), a high proportion have a very high BAC indeed (over, say, .150). This is true for the data of Bedford et al and in many other datasets, such as the earlier Irish series reported by Walsh et al³ (A difference between the two series is that the proportion with zero BAC is much higher in the more recent series.) There are implications for who should be targeted in countermeasures. Many of those with such high BACs have a history of alcohol abuse and/or drug abuse and/or suicide attempts.

Secondly, a possible measure that is specific to drunk pedestrians is to impose legislatively a maximum BAC for being (or walking) in a public place, as advocated by Hawks. Enforcement would utilise a breathalyser, as for drink-driving. This would probably be easier than attempting to prevent drink-walking with laws prohibiting drunkenness. Before this is dismissed as politically impracticable, our previous point should be remembered: even if the limit were as high as .150 (and thus perhaps acceptable to public opinion), there would probably be a worthwhile reduction in pedestrian fatalities if enforcement were successful. The penalties available might need to include loss of driving licence (but we are unsure if this or anything else would indeed deter people who have such a high BAC). Thirdly, there are measures that can be directed at alcohol abuse, and there are measures that can promote pedestrian safety, but there is no reason to be optimistic about directing countermeasures specifically at drunk pedestrians. The measures that will most improve the safety of drunk pedestrians are those that will most improve the safety of sober pedestrians --- in particular, speed limits that are lower than at present and that are enforced more strictly.

TP Hutchinson, CN Kloeden, VL Lindsay
Centre for Automotive Safety Research, University of Adelaide, South
Australia 5005
Email: timothy.hutchinson@adelaide.edu.au

References

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3. Walsh D, Bofin P, Sheehan BJ, Oâ Donnell B, Dean G. Road traffic accidents and alcohol, Dublin and Kildare 1977-1981. Irish Journal of Medical Science 1986; 155, 156-159.
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