

REGIONAL REPORTS

The Child Accident Prevention Foundation of Southern Africa (CAPFSA)

Newsletter from Cape Town (December 1995)

It has been 35 years since South Africa severed all political and traditional ties with the British Crown but some traditions die harder than others. This past year, South Africans of all ages collectively shelled out over R2 million (about £350 000) on fireworks and celebrated Guy Fawkes night with gusto such as I doubt can ever be witnessed even in the United Kingdom. And, as happens every year, the Anti-Guy Fawkes lobby came out in force via the printed media only days later calling for the private use of fireworks to be banned once and for all. The main rationale for such appeals are environmental pollution and danger and distress to animals. Of course there is also the little matter of danger to children for we do see a small number of burn injuries resulting from carelessness every time November 5th rolls around. Not what one would call an 'epidemic', certainly not compared with the number of burns from other causes, drowning, or road traffic injuries. This year, it seems that Guy Fawkes may indeed be laid to rest on the southern tip of Africa; few will miss him. I only wish we could so easily eradicate other hazards from our society.

Speaking of road traffic injuries, the summer school holidays officially began two days ago and the national road death toll already stands at 75. South Africa (the Western Cape in particular) is expecting a bumper tourist season between now and February and I suspect it will be a bumper season for road traffic trauma as well. The unfortunate combination of excellent freeway systems, plentiful alcohol, an unmotivated police service, and high dependency on private transport, makes the average South African driver a dangerous person while the passenger and pedestrian simply take their chances. The influence of alcohol consumption on trauma mortality has been emphasised in a technical report recently published by the Medical Research Council (SA).^{*} Results reveal that over one half of deaths of pedestrians and passengers, 56% of homicides, 62% of fire fatalities, and 31% of drownings were alcohol related.

As is the case every festive season, the Department of Transport has launched a massive media campaign urging safe behaviour on the country's roads. Another (pale) ray of hope comes in the form of long overdue legislation governing the use of passenger restraints which becomes official on 1 January 1996: More than 10 years after CAPFSA together with other non-governmental organisations submitted convincing arguments in favour of child restraints, drivers will now be obliged to ensure that children aged 3-14 years are restrained in both the front and back seats *provided* the vehicle is fitted with restraints of some kind. In other words, vehicles without fitted restraints are exempt from the law. Admittedly it would be pointless making standardised child restraints compulsory in every vehicle while the cost of such devices remains unaffordable to most people. However, a CAPFSA-led petition to the Ministries of Finance and Transport calling for car

restraints to be exempted from value added tax was turned down in 1994 on the grounds that restraints remain classified as 'non-essential' items. As my old music teacher used to say: 'There is still so much good work to be done . . .'

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^{*}Medical Research Council Community Health Research Group. *A profile of violence and injury mortality in the Cape Town Metropole*. MRC (SA), 1995.

Malaysia

Rajan Krishnan has sent a newspaper report (*New Straits Times* 8 March 1995) describing a pilot project to encourage the use of cycling helmets. Rajan notes: this is probably the first concerted, coordinated effort in Asia. Though helmeted bicyclists can be seen sporadically in 1994 there were more than 235 fatalities and police data showed that about 40% had head injuries while 50% had multiple injuries (probably including the head). The project won an award from the Academy of Medicine of Malaysia.

Child Safe Wales-Diogelu Plant Cymru

Two years ago 70 people interested in injury prevention for children met to try and form an all Wales' organisation. They agreed to call the new organisation Child Safe Wales: a title that was already in existence for road safety organisations. Two years on we now have charitable status and have become an established organisation. All the governmental bodies concerned with safety are based at the Welsh Office in Cardiff so it is important to have a separate organisation to represent the interests of children. We have good links with safety organisations in England, Scotland and Ireland as well as, of course, with colleagues in Europe. Child Safe Wales-Diogelu Plant Cymru is a bilingual organisation with Welsh and English having equal status. We are closely associated with academic work throughout Wales and with CAPIC: the Collaboration for Accident Prevention and Injury Control led by Professor Stephen Palmer. Child Safe Wales is at present working on:

- An information telephone line: Safety Line Cymru.
- A network of safe community projects for children.
- Safe alliance work on playground injuries.
- Work on preventing fractures in children.
- Preventing bath scalds.

Further information: Steve Baker, Child Safe Wales 1-3 Ty Glas Road, Llanishen, Cardiff, Wales UK CF4 5EB (Jo Sibert chair).

Egypt's traffic situation is out of control

A recent visit to Egypt reaffirmed my belief that Egyptians are extraordinary risk takers. Rarely do drivers stop for red lights, much less stop signs. As a matter of fact, stopping at a red light is considered dangerous because it is so unexpected! Policemen sometimes stand in the middle of an intersection to get cars to stop, but occasionally this doesn't work and every year policemen are injured being run over by cars.

Driving at night in Egypt is truly a bizarre activity. Because, by tradition, it is con-

sidered rude to put headlights on at night, no one does. Not surprisingly, therefore, cars are not very visible. The only time one is allowed to put on headlights is when one is approaching another car. This quick flashing indicates the presence of another car but may have other effects, as well.

Hardly anyone obeys one way signs. Consequently, if you're traveling on a one way street, don't be alarmed if cars approach you from the opposite direction and don't honk your horn, because that's also considered rude. But feel free to honk for almost any other situation; under those circumstances, it is entirely acceptable.

Finally, most streets have 2-3 lanes of traffic, but these are not adhered to either. Cars cram in closely to one another to form 5-6 narrow lanes. This makes crossing the street extremely hazardous for pedestrians; despite this, they don't seem to take much notice. Many Egyptians feel that if it is God's will for them to die that day, so be it. Therefore, drivers have to be cautious when they approach intersections because pedestrians are not carefully scanning the traffic as they would in other countries.

All this makes driving in Egypt a harrowing experience. But does it lead to more motor vehicle crashes? This is likely but unknown because Egypt does not have a collision database. More research is needed to determine whether crashes are actually higher in Egypt as a result of this amazing lack of compliance with customary traffic rules.

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MORE NEWS AND NOTES

Hit by a train — and survives!

A 20 year old bicyclist (who, not incidentally, admitted to having drunk two beers) was hit by a train and dragged more than 40 feet before being released. He attributed the occurrence to faulty brakes on his bike. It seems other factors may have been at work (G Roy, *Journal de Montreal*, 18 August 1995).

Another adolescent boy was not so fortunate. He had just avoided a train coming in one direction when he was struck and killed by another coming from the opposite direction. The story fails to provide any explanation why the section of tracks he crossed was unprotected (G Baker, *The Gazette*, 25 October 1995).

Inflated insurance claims

A study reported by the *Wall Street Journal* (MA Jacobs, 6 April 1995) concludes that in the US 35% to 42% of all crash related medical claims are questionable — implying that 'most state legal systems encourage car accident victims to inflate . . . medical costs to boost their insurance compensation'. (*Editor's note*: if this is true, it is a good reason to be cautious about using insurance data as a proxy for injury costs. On the other hand, if these amounts are actually paid, maybe these data simply reflect another side of reality.)