Motor vehicle occupant protection for children

EDITOR,—Thanks for the several articles in the June issue that discuss motor vehicle occupant protection for children. I have a few comments to add to the discussion.

In response to your comment about possible industry foot dragging in 'Random thoughts', the debate going on throughout the NHTSA and car seat industries is whether the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) right now is not whether to install universal anchorages for child restraints, but which design will be the best in the long run. Since a design standard is to be adopted, it must allow for the greatest flexibility of future improvements. Many advocates as well as industry experts in the occupant protection field do not think that the UCRA (UCRA, the 'American ISOFIX') is the best design. The Europeans have moved ahead to begin the refinement of the ISO standard. Since a new anchorage design and fitting, with two manufacturers offering installed anchors in their 1998 models along with compatible child restraints.

The General Motors 'UCRA' design uses existing car seat belts (bucks and webbing). It ignores the extensive research and consensus building that has gone into the ISO committee's design. I, and many others, feel strongly that adoption of the General Motors' design, will be innovative and do little to simplify installation. Rather than one belt to tighten, parents would have two lower anchorages that the user must tighten. The UCRA is 'uniform' but will never be 'universal' for the Europeans, Canadians, and Australians are planning on using the rigid anchorages.

As Dr Flaura Winston says in her comment on Clinton's foreword, we can hope that the final NHTSA rule will further universal harmonization as well as promote long range adaptability. So the opposition to the General Motors proposal as put forward by the UCRA is that killing by the anchorage, type of anchorages (as with airbags) but a desire by the interna-

tional community to achieve what we have long envisioned, a truly foolproof snap-in installation for child restraints.

In this regard, Dr Fred Rivara's conclusion (ISCAIP) report that children's restraint use needs more attention. Regarding child carabag fatalities, I would like to point out that the children (other than rear facing infants) who have been killed were NOT using restraints at all or used them incorrectly. We don't have any evidence yet that forward facing children in child restraints or using lap and shoulder belts correctly are in danger of dying due to the anchorage, type of anchorages of some restrained children have been injured.

While the 'Back Seat is Best' may be statistically true, many advocates believe that it is not without its best practice. If the choice were between putting a 6 year old child in a lap belt in the back rather than the lap/shoulder belt with a belt positioning booster in the front, I would rather put that child in front. Studies that have shown a rear seat advantage have focused on deaths, because adequate injury data (that would show 'seat belt syndrome' injuries from rear seat lap belts, for example) are not available. Also, as shut-off switches, smart airbags, and other devices come on the market, the front seat airbag hazard will no longer apply. I urge caution in the institutionalization of the back seat message into state law, as has happened in Rhode Island this year.

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PS. Safe Ride News is a quarterly report on developments in child occupant protection and bicycle/pedestrian safety. To subscribe and 'how-to' information related to child restraints, summaries of recent research, innovative programs, and new restraints. The newsletter is broadening its coverage of Canadian activities and hopes to include them as well. To submit news or story ideas, or for subscription information, contact Safe Ride News Publications (address above).

Should injury prevention programmes be targeted?

EDITOR,—I read with interest the September issue of Injury Prevention regarding debate concerning targeted programmes versus pop-

ulation approaches in injury prevention. I do not agree with Ward's assessment that 'most parents are able to determine for themselves the risk of their child falling'. I disagree with Ward not because I think most parents might be incapable of such determinations, but because of other variables that come into these determinations—such as values and socioeconomic conditions. So in light that speed kills, drinking and driving can be fatal, and not wearing a seat belt contributes to the seriousness of injury. We know these things must change and even have strict laws addressing them, yet such tragedies happen every day in every part of the world. Clearly knowledge and laws cannot always protect us. If anything good is to come out of the Paris crash tragedy, we must do more than redouble our efforts to promote and enforce safe driving behaviors. We also must educate ourselves and our decision makers about what other prevention options are available and effective, so that when the ubiquitous lack of perfect in human nature surfaces, it need not

Deborah Stewart, USA, 1997


Death on the road

EDITOR,—Every year more than 40 000 people are killed on US roads. Each of these people was someone's child, mother, father, or other loved one. The death of Princess Di, however, has focused public attention on motor vehicle crashes in a way that has previously unparalleled. The public is re-

minded yet again that speed kills, drinking and driving can be fatal, and not wearing a seat belt contributes to the seriousness of injury. We know these things must change and even have strict laws addressing them, yet such tragedies happen every day in every part of the world. Clearly knowledge and laws cannot always protect us. If anything good is to come out of the Paris crash tragedy, we must do more than redouble our efforts to promote and enforce safe driving behaviors. We also must educate ourselves and our decision makers about what other prevention options are available and effective, so that when the ubiquitous lack of perfect in human nature surfaces, it need not

While we don't yet know enough details about Princess Di and the companies, we do know that cars can be built to provide occupant protection and so they cannot exceed reasonable speeds. The sides of roads can be designed to cushion and safety wipes. It is clear that we can prevent intoxicated drivers from driving. Better transport systems can attract the public to safer means of travel.

These are not radical suggestions, but feasible and potentially effective. A fundamental tenet of the science of injury control is that prevention should be focused on the 'weakest link' in the chain of causal events leading to a crash. However, it is not clear that we have attempted to identify and target the multifaceted opportunities to prevent injuries. Typically the media focus is on who is 'at fault' and what the victim should have done to prevent injury. Let us seize this opportunity to educate the public about additional options that include car design, road design, and alternative forms of transport, because it is through public support and advocacy that changes can occur.

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