

**Text of Radio Talk by  
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On the occasion of World Health Day 2004**

**Globally, road traffic accidents kill about 1.2 million people every year. Another 20 million are severely injured.**

**In the South-East Asia Region, an estimated 354,000 people died from road traffic injuries in 2001 and an estimated 6.2 million people were admitted to hospitals. Every hour, 34 people die as a result of road traffic injuries in the Region. In the next two decades, this figure is predicted to rise by 144 per cent making it the largest increase among all WHO Regions. Meanwhile, in developed countries, over the same period, road traffic injuries are expected to decline by 27 percent.**

**World Health Day this year focuses on injury prevention, with the theme: “Road Safety Is No Accident”. The message is: given the strong political will, the national governments can make the road safe for their citizens. On this occasion, WHO will release “The World Report on Road Traffic Injury Prevention” which provides a global picture on road traffic injuries and fatalities, identifies major risk factors, intervention measures, and makes recommendations for action.**

Road traffic accidents are a serious concern in all countries of the Region regardless of their size. The increase in road traffic injuries and deaths have resulted from the rapid motorization and mobility within countries, with little concern for road safety. There is an economic cost as well. The direct cost of road traffic injuries to countries in the South-East Asia Region is an estimated US\$ 14 billion. Then there is the cost that societies and families have to bear in terms of suffering and dependence due to disability.

There is much that can be done to reduce the risk of road traffic injuries and mitigate their consequences. The first step is to change the mind set of the public who believe that road traffic injuries are an inescapable part of life. To most people, “accident” implies that the event is random and unpredictable. This leads to a sense of complacency, with regard to prevention of injuries. This need not be so. Current evidence shows that road traffic injuries are preventable to a great extent.

The second challenge is to characterize high-risk environments and vulnerable people by examining the relationship between the human, vehicle and environmental factors of a crash. Based on these, appropriate measures need to be taken for pre-crash, during the crash and post-crash phases.

**We know that some people, some highways and some vehicles are more vulnerable to road traffic accidents. We also know that poor road-worthiness of a vehicle increases the risk of injuries. We know that motorcycle riders without helmets, not wearing seat belts, driving under the influence of alcohol, allowing children to occupy the front seat, would all lead to road traffic injuries. Speeding beyond the set limits, specially on the highways, greatly increases the probability of fatal injuries. Poor visibility on the roads, either due to fog or due to inadequate lighting, or poor eye sight, greatly increases the risk of injury. Poor physical health of the driver is also known to increase the risk of road traffic injuries.**

**The third challenge is to implement proven measures to reduce the burden of road traffic injuries. These include transportation planning, designing safe roads, adhering to standard safety features and road-worthiness of vehicles. Inculcating safety culture through enforcement and education for the use of seat belts and crash helmets, curbing drunken driving and speed control measures are also important. Strict driving licence tests for physical fitness and driving skills will go a long way in preventing injuries. What we need to do for this is to develop a broad based partnership between governments, vehicle manufacturers, traffic management authorities, and, the civil society to ensure effective application of these measures. Traffic injury prevention requires multi-sectoral cooperation and multi-disciplinary inputs.**

**There is evidence that the most vital component to change the behaviours of motorists is public education and enforcement of traffic laws. Such laws need societal support to be effective. Blatant disregard of many traffic laws is a leading cause of accidents. The public at large needs to be informed and educated not only about the risk factors but also about the laws and their enforcement. The most important message for safe driving would be, “obey all traffic laws”.**

**When penalty is delivered swiftly and people are enlightened, they tend to comply with traffic safety laws. In some countries, laws for use of motorcycle helmets produced compliance close to 100%. This has been possible because of sustained public education combined with quick punishment of the defaulters, once again on a sustained basis.**

**Motor vehicle accidents are more than a transportation and mobility issue. Today, they have become a major public health problem. Our efforts should, therefore, focus on the safety of people, based on sciences and engineering.**

**In order to alleviate human suffering from injuries, health facilities must be geared to provide an effective and efficient response. They must be enabled to provide improved care to those injured. For this, we need to enhance the capacity of the public health system to provide early and optimal pre-hospital care, hospital-based care and rehabilitation services. It is heartening to note that some countries have taken initiatives to set up a network of comprehensive trauma centres.**

**As I have emphasized earlier, I would like to reiterate that effective road injury prevention requires multi-sectoral partnerships between different government agencies, public works, public health, law enforcement, engineering, education and different sections of civil society. We, therefore, need to constitute an empowered multi-sectoral national mechanism which brings on board all those with a stake in road safety to ensure successful functioning. Strong national, regional and global networks need to be urgently established to support the implementation of policy and strategies for road safety.**

**Understanding the need for stronger commitment and action, WHO is committed to support Member Countries in enhancing their capacity to deal with this epidemic. This would be through providing assistance in gathering evidence, sharing good practices, providing tools and guidelines for prevention and care, and strengthening human resources.**

**On the occasion of World Health Day, I call on all governments, academic institutions, professional organizations, nongovernmental organizations and the private sector to join hands for a lasting partnership. Let us, together, control the “epidemic” of road traffic injuries in the South-East Asia Region.**