



World Health Day

7 April 2004

MESSAGE FROM THE REGIONAL DIRECTOR



Every year about 1.2 million people die and another 20 million are severely injured in road traffic accidents, revealing the silent, pandemic nature of this emerging public health problem. For every 1 000 deaths, 21 are as a result of road traffic injuries.

While death is the most serious outcome of road accidents, 50 million people are permanently disabled, and countless others temporarily, from road traffic injuries every year, across the globe.

In South-East Asia, an estimated 354,000 people died from road traffic injuries in 2001 and an estimated 6.2 million people were admitted to hospitals. This high burden of road traffic injuries in the Region is predicted to rise by 144 per cent in the next two decades, the largest increase among all WHO Regions. On the other hand, developed countries are expected to register a decline by 27 per cent in road traffic injuries.

The direct cost of road traffic injuries to countries in the South-East Asia Region is an estimated US\$ 14 billion. The traditional use of the term “accidents” for road traffic injuries indicates that the event is random and unpredictable, leading to the under-recognition of the epidemic in the Region. The first challenge, therefore, is to change the mindset that injuries are not an inescapable part of living and they are indeed predictable and therefore, preventable.

The second challenge is to characterize the high-risk environment and vulnerable people. To prevent and mitigate the challenge presented by road traffic injuries, we need hard data on patterns, risk factors and effectiveness of interventions. We already have some knowledge about vulnerable people, places and vehicles. We know that some people, some highways and some vehicles are more vulnerable to road traffic accidents. We also know the poor road-worthiness of a vehicle increases the risk of injuries. We know that motorcycle riders without helmets, speeding, not wearing seat belts, driving under the influence of alcohol, allowing children to occupy the front seat, are all likely to increase the occurrence and consequence of road traffic injuries.

Equipped with this evidence, we can formulate a series of measures to reduce the burden of road traffic injuries. These may include transportation planning, designing safe roads for vulnerable road users, mandatory safety features and road-worthiness of vehicles, strengthening safety culture through enforcement and education for the use of seat belts, crash helmets, curbing drinking and driving, speed control measures and development of partnerships for safety. To deal effectively with injury prevention requires multi-sectoral partnerships between different government agencies (road, public health, law enforcement, engineering, education) and civil society. We, therefore, need to constitute an empowered nodal agency with clear authority as well as financial and human resources for road safety to oversee the partnership into action. I would strongly urge our governments to establish such nodal agencies.

For effective and efficient response and improved care to those injured, 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.

World Health Day 2004 focuses on “Road Safety” and the slogan is “Road Safety Is No Accident”. The message is that road safety requires a deliberate attempt from several sectors and a strong political will to prevent tragedies on the roads. The World Report on Road Traffic Injury Prevention provides a global picture on road traffic injuries and fatalities, identifies major risk factors and interventions, and provides recommendations for implementation.

Understanding the need for stronger commitment and action from its Member States, WHO is committed to help them enhance their capacity to deal with this emerging epidemic; through providing assistance in gathering evidence, sharing good practices, providing tools and guidelines for prevention and care, and strengthening human resources.

I call on all governments, academic institutions, professional organizations, non-governmental organizations and the private sector to join hands for an enduring partnership to control the “epidemic” of road traffic injuries in the South-East Asia Region.



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Regional Director



**ROAD SAFETY
IS NO ACCIDENT**