



## *The Road to Safe Driving*

*Must a civilized society tolerate thousands of needless traffic 'accidents' every year? Somehow we do — and think little of it unless we ourselves become victims. Here we view the carnage on the road as a social problem. And clear 'the other guy' of blame...*

□ In a debate on violence in society in the British House of Lords a few years ago, a member pointed out to the assembled peers that they each ran a dozen times more risk of death or injury from auto accidents than from all other forms of aggression. "The reminder was timely," commented *The Guardian*, "since to talk about violence without mentioning cars is rather like discussing 'Macbeth' without mentioning blood."

It may feel strange to the average driver to have his car thus looked upon as an instrument of aggression, but the fact is that the motor vehicle has killed and maimed more people in its brief history than any bomb or fire-arm ever invented. The yearly toll of blood and tears exacted by unsafe driving is incomparably greater than by murder or any other crime.

So the relentless carnage on the roads may properly be regarded as a critical social problem. It is hardly overstating the case to call it, as a safety official once did, "another manifestation of man's inhumanity to man". For much of the blood on the pavement flows essentially from the refusal of drivers to respect the legal and moral rights of others. Those who would dispute this statement on the grounds that "accidents are bound to happen" should consider the following facts:

- Most so-called traffic "accidents" are avoidable. Most happen in fair weather and under good road conditions. Some accident experts speculate that most occur as a result of people disregarding either the law or well-known safety rules.
- In Canada, where traffic accidents take the lives of 6,000 people annually, the use of alcohol is involved in up to half of these fatal incidents.
- Accident researchers say that most people who drive dangerously defective cars and trucks are aware of the defects and are gambling — often with the lives of strangers and family or friends as passengers — on not having trouble. Mechanical defects are responsible for an estimated 20,000 serious accidents in Canada every year.

It has been observed that in the western world today, there is no longer such a thing as a "motorist". So prevalent has the use of cars and trucks become that traffic is simply the public at large on wheels.

It follows that a person operating a motor vehicle has the same social obligation to keep the peace on the streets and highways as a person in any other public area. The only difference is that one's capacity to inflict injury on others is magnified enor-



mously when one is behind the steering wheel of a potential juggernaut weighing a ton and a half and capable of hurtling through space at more than 150 kilometres an hour.

Yet the enemies of society on wheels are ordinarily rather harmless people. They are the respectable working man who takes a chance on driving home after he has had a few drinks; the housewife preoccupied with a family problem as she tailgates the car in front of her; the young fellow who says, "let's see how fast this thing will go on the straight stretch"; the salesman with thousands of driving hours behind him who feels it is beneath his dignity to signal; the vacationer who sets out on an overnight run to his destination when he hasn't had enough sleep.

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*Driving as if everybody else is crazy — as some really are*

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Just ordinary people acting carelessly, you might say. But it is a principle both of law and common morality that carelessness is no excuse when one's actions are liable to bring death or damage to others. Sins of omission and commission are equally reprehensible if they cause human grief.

A minority of the killers and mutilators of the road go beyond carelessness to wanton recklessness. Some — not all of them young, by any means — get a thrill out of wilfully breaking traffic laws. Some bully their fellow road users by facing down pedestrians, forcing their way into traffic flows, and cutting perilously close in front of other vehicles when passing. Some lose their tempers and employ their vehicles as weapons to threaten the objects of their anger. Terrifyingly enough, some persist in driving while under the influence of alcohol or other narcotics. Drivers like these are public menaces, and they should be publicly condemned as such.

"Always drive as if everybody else is crazy," runs the old taxi driver's maxim. That some taxi drivers behave in traffic as if they were crazy themselves does not detract from the fundamental soundness of this advice. And, in fact, it has been

established that many otherwise sane and sensible people *do* suffer a form of insanity when they get behind the steering wheel. Researchers in Ontario have estimated that as many as 80 per cent of all automobile accidents can be attributed to drivers' psychological quirks.

The quirk that makes people combine drinking and driving is all too well known, though it is difficult to deal with. Less conspicuous as a cause of accidents are the sudden waves of irrationality that come over perfectly sober people when they are driving their cars. Emotional upsets can impede drivers' reactions, hamper their judgment, and blind them to hazards that might otherwise be evident. A fit of anger when driving can easily mean not only a loss of control over one's emotions, but over the vehicle as well.

"The worst guy of the lot," a traffic investigator told the *Imperial Oil Review*, "is the man who tells himself he's a good driver and has no quirks. This is the very attitude that may eventually *cause* an accident." The experts caution that it is vital for every driver to be aware of the hidden tensions imposed by the act of driving, and to make a conscious effort to keep one's emotions in check.

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*Society must commit itself to improving driving habits*

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A sign outside of a little town in Japan pleads: "Please drive carefully. Our children might be disobeying us." It is a regrettable fact of life that far too many drivers, pedestrians and cyclists disobey the law and safety rules. The responsible driver must assume a degree of responsibility for their actions in addition to his own.

This may be unfair, but, as Maurice Chevalier remarked of old age, it is better than the alternative. To insist on your rights when you are on a collision course can be downright suicidal. A driver who practises forbearance is likely to live longer than one who does not.

Is it too much to ask that some day all drivers will drive responsibly? Probably. But we can hope nonetheless for a pronounced improvement on the grisly situation that prevails at present.

The question of how to make our public thoroughfares as safe as humanly possible is one that encompasses the fields of law, education, and pub-



lic attitudes. Not until society makes a broad and determined commitment to improve mass driving habits will the needless injury and loss of life cease.

On the legal front, the case is not helped by the seeming reluctance in some jurisdictions to enforce the standing traffic laws. Bearing in mind that undisciplined driving is a major cause of accidents, it is scarcely salutary to see cars whizzing past a 90 kmh. speed limit sign at 110 kmh. while policemen sit idly in their cars and watch.

The argument for such tacit toleration of illegality is that the laws are unrealistic. If this is the case, it is the duty of the governments concerned to render them realistic and then to ensure that they are strictly enforced.

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### *Improved accident statistics have safety experts worried*

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This is not to say, however, that the law has been lax in all respects or in all jurisdictions. On the contrary, significant legislative advances have been made towards safer driving in North America in the past few years. Safety standards for vehicles have been raised both at the point of manufacture and through periodic road-worthiness inspections. Speed limits have been lowered — although it is a forlorn commentary on our social priorities that the need for energy conservation, not road safety, has been primarily responsible for the latter move.

Reduced speed limits, sterner penalties for impaired driving, and the compulsory use of safety restraints have been introduced in some Canadian provinces. Mainly because of these measures, the national traffic accident rate declined by an estimated 13.2 per cent in 1976, a year which saw a 3 per cent increase in driving as measured in vehicle miles.

Paradoxically, this statistical improvement has accident experts worried. The Canada Safety Council says that the moderation in the figures is almost wholly due to legislation, and that there has been little or no improvement in the way Canadian drivers behave.

The Council fears that the lower statistics will engender complacency and so obscure the real problem. People may tend to forget that a total of nearly a quarter of a million people killed or seriously injured in auto accidents each year is still a national scandal in a country of good roads, modern equipment, and enlightened traffic laws.

The only real and lasting solution, say the experts, is to get it into peoples' heads that driving is a skilled task requiring constant care and concentration. A driver in today's traffic is called upon to perform a complex range of functions simultaneously — not only operating the vehicle itself, but surveying the entire fast-moving traffic picture and anticipating potential problems. A driver must assess the actions of others, make decisions while in motion, and exercise acute timing. Those who fail to do all these things present a menace to those with whom they share the road.

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### *Practically everyone feels immune from the responsibility*

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An exhaustive study designed to get to the roots of the traffic accident problem in the United States established that "inadequate driving skills" figure much more prominently in accidents than had been previously imagined. Poor driving not only gives rise to innumerable accidents, but adds to their severity. It was found that many drivers, when faced with a crisis, did not know the correct way to steer or stop their cars.

Ironically, another study conducted in the U.S. at about the same time showed that nine-tenths of the people covered by a broad survey rated themselves as "above average" in driving skills and safety awareness. Even those with a record of convictions for traffic violations felt that public exhortations to safer driving were not applicable to them.

This was a vivid illustration of what policemen call "the other guy syndrome", whereby "the other guy" is always a bad driver and always to blame for an accident. This mythical figure stands as a formidable opponent of any general improvement in driving habits. The difficulties inherent in promoting safer driving can be clearly seen when one considers that practically everyone concerned feels immune from responsibility for the appalling accident rate.



In an age of mass secondary education, the long-term remedy for the obvious lack of driving skill and knowledge would seem to be in driver education at the high school level. Still, education can be expected to go only so far as long as people persist in defying their social obligation to their fellow users of the roads.

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### *The core of the problem is uncivil behaviour*

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The irresponsibility that accounts for much of the problem is not confined to drivers. Pedestrians regularly violate traffic regulations; they are at fault in most vehicle-pedestrian accidents. Many cyclists appear to believe that they are not subject to the basic rules of the road.

The core of the problem is uncivil behaviour. The courtesy, consideration, forbearance, tolerance and respect for human rights which go to make up civilization are disgracefully lacking in the traffic stream.

This incivility applies as much to the state of equipment as to driving habits. A person in charge of an unsafe vehicle is putting others in jeopardy. The prevalent attitude that the individual is in some way *entitled* to imperil others by driving unsafely must be fought.

"The old challenge of physical distance has been transmuted into a new challenge of human relations between drivers who, having learned how to annihilate space, have thereby put themselves in constant danger of annihilating each other," says *A Study of History*. The facts about traffic accidents plainly show that this challenge of human relations has not been met.

On the whole, the motor vehicle has been a boon to mankind. If this blessing has been turned into a curse for the millions who have suffered from senseless accidents over the years, it is because men and women have rejected their duty as civilized human beings. The automobile has wrought great changes in society, but the role of the civilized individual is changeless, whether in or out of the driver's seat.

John Donne never saw a motor car, but he might have been addressing the driver of today when he wrote these famous lines almost 400 years ago:

"Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

### *Getting Assistance*

Traffic safety courses and information are available across Canada through provincial safety leagues and councils located in Vancouver, Edmonton, Regina, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal, Fredericton, Charlottetown, Halifax and St. John's. These organizations offer a wealth of printed safety advice and can direct you to the nearest point in your province where defensive driving and other courses may be taken. Further information is available by writing to: Canada Safety Council, 1765 St. Laurent Blvd., Ottawa, Ont. K1G 3V4