Nut Behind the Wheel

Richard J B Willis, BUC Health Ministries Director

It is said that the most important part of a car is the nut behind the wheel! Given that the "nut" is at best irrational in his or her behavior, and add alcohol to the picture, there is a recipe for disaster.

Continental Europe has the highest per capita consumption of alcohol in the world, and a parallel high rate of social, health and economic harm associated with alcohol use. Paradoxically, Europe is also the highest producer of alcohol internationally, thus posing a major headache for European health ministers who need to find a solution to the problem.

Over 400 health professionals from 27 countries met in May to lay plans for alcohol-harm-reduction which will be incorporated into a European Union strategy to be published later this year. In doing so they recognized that co-operative action is the key to success in controlling, if not eliminating, the present problem levels.

Proposals include the following:

- a maximum blood alcohol concentration limit of 0.5 g/L and breath equivalent to be introduced with immediate effect throughout Europe;

- a lower limit of 0.2 g/L for novice drivers and drivers of public service and heavy goods vehicles – also with immediate effect (countries with existing lower levels should not increase them).

It is further recommended that reducing the maximum blood alcohol concentration levels for all drivers to 0.2 g/L would have a significant impact on current drink-drive statistics.

- unrestricted breath-test powers of an equivalent and agreed standard should be implemented in Europe

- there should be common penalties for drink-driving with clarity and swiftness of punishment (perhaps linked to blood-alcohol levels) and including license penalties, suspensions, fines, imprisonment, ignition locks and vehicle impoundment;
- all drivers on European roads with blood-alcohol levels in excess of 0.5 g/L should have an unconditional license suspension for at least 6 months;

- drivers thus suspended to have driver education, rehabilitation and treatment schemes, with penalties for defaulters, conforming to agreed guidelines and protocols.

The proposals in a document, *Bridging the Gap*, go well beyond plans to deal with drink-driving and will include price and availability of alcohol as well as ways of dealing with alcohol dependence. Europe, not before time, is set to deal with the alcohol issue.

Clearly the message to the nut behind the wheel is that he or she should not be tight! Far from it, any hint of alcohol for the driver is to be out of the question, and time spent in supporting these proposals will be well spent in sorting out the most important part of the vehicle.

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