

Thinking Hard About Road Safety

By Don Aitkin

What we have begun to call 'the Christmas road toll' has been a shocker, and while we in Canberra can be thankful that our score was a nice round 0, the awful and sometimes inexplicable examples of road death over the holiday season across our country should make us ask Why?

Why do these dreadful things happen? Why can't we stop them? Why does it go on happening every year?

In fact, it happens every week, indeed, on most days. In round figures, 1500 of us die each year on the Australian roads. That's just over four people a day. Indeed, the Christmas road toll was no worse than the average, since just over four people died in that two-week period as well.

The Vision Zero strategy announced by the ACT Government plans to reduce the numbers of deaths by analysing the cause of each crash and dealing with the causes. We in the NRMA/ACT Road Safety Trust strongly support that strategy.

The Trust works with ANU, UC and ADFA in undertaking research into those causes, and into how to prevent further crashes. UC is working with us to analyse the 'car culture' in Canberra, the Australian city most dependent on the motor vehicle.

It will be some time before we have an accurate account of the way in which we in Canberra see the car, the roads and the use we make of both.

But here are six factors that we know to be important in understanding how crashes occur.

1. Although no one likes to say so loudly and clearly, we are addicted to speed. The English writer Aldous Huxley said seventy years ago that of all the pleasures available to humanity, speed was the only one to have been invented in modern times. Virtually all the car ads on television refer to speed and power.
2. Our roads are a lot better than they used to be, and we drive faster than was once the case. We tend not to slow down much when conditions worsen. No matter what the state of the road, there is a safe speed to drive on it. It may be a very slow speed. The notion that all our troubles would be over if only the roads were improved is fatuous.
3. Our cars are much better than they were once were. They are quieter, handle better, brake more quickly, and are filled with safety measures. But we drive them a lot faster, and the interior comfort and apparent stability of the car may not always be a good guide to the driver's safety. See Factor #2 above.
4. Humans are amazingly adept at driving, which is a highly complicated, multi-tasked skill. Before very long, we can accurately place our car between posts,

- negotiate roundabouts at speed, and filter into multi-lane traffic, also at speed. The car becomes an extension of ourselves. For the same reason, if we are impatient or angry when we begin to drive, our car becomes an impatient car or an angry car. Such cars are best avoided by others, but we usually have little forewarning.
5. The right time to learn to drive is when we are young, because the skills involved can be learned quickly and successfully in adolescence. Unfortunately, a great deal of experience is needed before a new driver is a safe driver, and young people also have a false sense of their invulnerability. The death rate among young drivers and passengers is much higher than for older age-groups.
 6. We probably see driving as a 'right', when we should see it as a 'contract'. In that contract we have a duty of care to all others we encounter, and that duty of care ought to be seen as much more impatient than our need to meet a deadline, get to work on time or pick up the kids at 4.00. 'First, do no harm' ought to be our maxim whenever we get behind the wheel. It doesn't look to be.

Yes, it would nice if King's Highway, or the Princes Highway, or the road to the snow were all four-lane freeways. But until they are, and even then, the prevention of crashes and road deaths starts with us, the drivers.

[Professor Aitkin is the Chair of the NRMA/ACT Road Safety Trust.]