

Editorial

Road Traffic Injuries – Changing Trend?

Road traffic injuries are one of the leading causes of death worldwide resulting in more than 1.27 million deaths; almost equal to the number of deaths caused by HIV/ AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria combined. In addition, road traffic crashes are estimated to cause 20 to 50 million non-fatal injuries every year. Death and disability due to road traffic injuries affect all age groups but the most affected are those in the young and productive years of their life. It is estimated that road traffic injuries will move up in the ranking of leading causes of death from tenth in 2004 to fifth in 2030. ⁽¹⁾

Economic cost of road traffic injuries is roughly 1%-2% of gross national product in most of countries. Furthermore, road traffic injuries lead to indirect costs such as productivity loss caused by disabled population and their care providers, loss of property and police/ insurance activities. ⁽²⁾

The Islamic Republic of Iran initiated a program of comprehensive road safety interventions in 2005. Three enforcement based interventions – seatbelt law, motorcycle helmet law and general traffic law enforcement e.g. use of speed cameras, patrolling and mass media educational campaigns on national radio and television, were introduced in all 28 provinces of country. Fatalities per 10,000 vehicles decreased from 24.2 in 2004 to 13.4 in 2007. Similarly road traffic injuries per 10,000 vehicles decreased from 227.6 to 155.6 in 2007. ⁽³⁾

In the Arabian Gulf countries road traffic accidents are growing public health problem. The discovery of oil around the middle of the last century has changed many aspects of

life in the Gulf Countries. There was an explosion in immigration with corresponding increase in vehicles.

In a report issued by the World Health Organization (WHO), Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has the highest road accident toll in the world, which now makes up the country's principal cause of death in adult males aged 16 to 36. In Saudi Arabia from 1971 to 1997; 564,762 persons died or were injured in road traffic accidents, a figure equivalent to 3.5% of total population of Saudi Arabia. During this period 66,914 people died on the roads due to accidents, amounting one person killed and four injured every hour. Over 65% accidents occur because of excess speed, drivers disobeying traffic signals or use of cell phone while driving. ⁽⁴⁾

It is widely believed that seat belt use is an effective way to reduce road accidents fatalities and injuries. Saudi Arabia enforced seat belt law on 5th December 2000 making seat belt use compulsory for all drivers and front seat passengers. A study conducted in Riyadh show seat belt use rate 33% for drivers and 4% for front passengers. ⁽⁵⁾

In Saudi Arabia during the year 2008-2009, total numbers of deaths due to roadside accidents were 645,813 i.e. 13 deaths per 1000 accidents. It amounts to one death every one and half hour or 18 deaths per day. Total number of traffic accidents last year reached 485,931 and value of economic loss due to accidents is estimated 13 billion Saudi Riyals per year. ⁽⁶⁾

Tertiary health care facilities are over burdened by huge number of people injured in road traffic accidents. About one third of all hospital beds in kingdom are occupied by road accident victims. Also, 79.2% of patients admitted to Riyadh Armed Forces Hospital with spinal injuries have sustained their injuries as a result of accidents. ⁽⁷⁾

Recently the government of Saudi Arabia launched a new system to make roads safe called “Saher System”. The “Saher” is a state-of-the-art traffic management system that can monitor vehicles and track them using a license plate recognition technology. It has been in development for a year and now that it’s working on all main thoroughfares in the major cities, it is monitoring traffic violations as they happen.

Some traffic lights are equipped with stationary and mobile cameras that record traffic violations. When a violation is committed, the system requests information from the Traffic Center’s database and issues an automatic ticket. A minimum of SR: 500 fine is imposed and if this is not paid within 30 days, it will increase monthly.⁽⁸⁾

The objectives of the system are:

1. To utilize the latest and most advanced technology in the field of intelligent transportation (ITS) in order to create a safe traffic environment.
2. To upgrade the existing road network.
3. To enhance public security by using the latest surveillance systems.
4. To ensure strict, accurate and constant implementation of traffic regulations.

Road traffic accidents are preventable but good data is important to understand the ways in which road safety interventions can be effective. It is assumed that new system will address the road safety problem in Saudi Arabia. It is suggested that school based safety education about driving and respecting the roads should be incorporated. Mass media as TV and Radio should be involved in safety campaigns.

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