

# Road Crash - not Road 'Accident'

Just as domestic *violence* is more than a *disturbance*, and the Police are a *service* rather than a *force* ...

it's no *accident* that road traffic victims say *crash!*



[www.whenlivescollide.co.uk](http://www.whenlivescollide.co.uk)

In his photo documentary 'When Lives Collide', involving RoadPeace members, Paul Wenham-Clarke explains why he has used the term 'incident' rather than 'accident':

*Until the day comes when someone knocks at your door to give you devastating news of a loved one, you will not truly understand the difference between these words. An accident is something that could not have been prevented, it was just one of those things and no one is to blame. How many of the stories you will read in this book fall into this category?*

**RoadPeace and road crash victims want everyone dealing with or reporting on road safety and collision issues, including the media, road safety and law enforcement professionals, not to use the term 'accident' when referring to road traffic crashes.**



**RoadPeace**  
dedicated to supporting  
road crash victims

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**‘Accident’ is . . .**

**NOT accurate**

**NOT constructive**

**NOT appropriate**

## 1 ‘Accident’ is not accurate

*‘The Oxford Dictionary defines an **accident** as an event that is: **without apparent cause** or that is **unexpected**. Its use in the context of child road deaths could not be more inappropriate. More is known about when, where and why child pedestrian-motor vehicle collisions occur, and who will die as a result, than for almost any other disease in childhood. It would make more sense to talk of a case of accidental meningitis or accidental leukaemia’*

**Prof. Ian Roberts, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.**

### ***Without cause? Unexpected?***

The causes of many crashes are well known. We know that there is an increased risk of a collision when drink driving or speeding are involved. Yet despite two decades of enforcement and education, one in six UK fatal crashes still involves a drink driver and twice as many fatal crashes involve speeding. While speeding is on the decrease, half of all drivers admit to breaking the 30 mph speed limit. *Endemic* is a more accurate description for speeding than is *Accidental*.

Fatigue is believed to contribute to 10% of all fatal crashes. Fatigue is a condition that comes on gradually and with clear warning signs, and cannot be considered unexpected.

In 2001, the British Medical Journal banned the use of the word ‘accident’ to avoid the connotation of unpredictability, since ‘most injuries and their precipitating events are predictable and preventable events’.<sup>1</sup> Fifteen years ago, leading epidemiologists described the belief that injuries are accidents as ‘**the last folklore subscribed to by rational men**’.<sup>2</sup>

*Why is it an ‘Accident’ when someone dies or is injured on our roads because someone took a decision to flout our laws, yet Manslaughter or Grievous Bodily Harm in other circumstances?*

Rita Taylor, RoadPeace Bristol Group

2000 years ago Aristotle warned that ‘**there is no science of the accident**’.

*To see your husband lying dead in a pool of his blood on a public street, yet all he had done was use a zebra crossing to cross a road . . . to know that the driver then burnt out the car and called someone to tow away the remains, how can this be deemed an accident?*

*My husband was killed by a person or persons unknown, as surely as if they had held a gun to his head or stabbed him with a knife. **It was no accident.***

Jane Evans, RoadPeace

## 2 'Accident' is not constructive

*Too often, road safety is treated as a transportation issue, not a public health issue, and road traffic injuries are called 'accidents', though most could be prevented. As a result, many countries put far less effort into understanding and preventing road traffic injuries than they do into understanding and preventing diseases that do less harm.*

**Dr. LEE Jong-wook, WHO Director General**<sup>3</sup> launching WHO's Safe Roads Day in April 2004.

In the mid 1990s, the US National Highway Traffic Safety Administration banned the use of the word 'accident' stating that 'continuation of the use of this word in lieu of 'crash' works against a public perception of the preventability of injuries and fatalities in the highway environment'.<sup>4</sup>

*Use of 'accident' takes responsibility away from the person who is culpable - through incompetence, aggression or other failures to drive safely.*

Peter Salter, RoadPeace London

Police should not approach any investigation with the foregone assumption that it was an accident. Thus the UK's Road Death Investigation Manual recommends that fatal crash scenes should be treated as potential homicide scenes.

Yet road crashes have not been given the same priority as other crimes since many are believed to be unintentional, and therefore less culpable. This discrimination is evidenced by:

- Traffic law enforcement is not a police core function although over four times as many people are killed on the road than are murdered. Traffic police officers have declined in numbers, while the Police have increased the officers available, including through transfers from traffic police, for preventing street crime and terrorism. At present in the Metropolitan Police Service only 2% of the officers are traffic officers.
- The new Home Office Victims' Code excludes all people injured in crashes, even when crimes such as speeding and drink driving are involved. Victims of minor property crime have more rights guaranteed in law than do victims permanently disabled in crashes caused by the culpable acts of others.
- Limited resources are allocated to a road death investigation. The Department for Transport estimates that the current resources allocated to a fatal road crash investigation amount to £1600, and £220 for a serious injury road crash.
- The leading cause of violent death – speeding - is considered a 'motoring offence', categorised with parking violations, and excluded from crime statistics. Speeding is currently responsible for more than 20 times the number of deaths from gun crime and four times the number from knife crime. The police Crime Reporting Information System monitor the numbers of victims of pick-pocketing, or how many cars or cycles were stolen, but do not include any data on crashes or the real road crimes.
- There is no monitoring of the legal outcome of road crash related prosecutions. The Home Office does not know how many fatal or serious injury crashes result in a driver being prosecuted. This would be unimaginable with other crimes and was criticised in the Transport Select Committee Report on Traffic Law Enforcement (2004).
- The most common charge in a fatal crash (and even this charge is only brought in a minority of cases) is that of 'Driving without due care and attention', which is a charge that can be brought when drivers have reversed into another vehicle. In 2007, a new charge will be introduced of 'Causing death by careless driving', only an either-way offence, and there is still no change regarding injuries, which remain unmentioned in any charge.

Thanks go to London's Mayor Ken Livingstone, RoadPeace's first patron, for requesting that the Metropolitan Police do not use the term 'accident'. Also, to June Webb, coordinator of RoadPeace's Manchester group, who was successful in getting Manchester City Council not to refer to crashes as 'accidents'.

***'Accident' is a word, the use of which in the road traffic context severely undermines the work of those who are trying to improve safety conditions on the road. How can road users be seriously expected to respond positively to road safety directives when every road death resulting from the neglect of such directives is thoughtlessly explained away, even by those issuing them, as being an 'accident'? Even when the perpetrator of a road tragedy is fuddled with drink or drugs, the word 'accident' is used with distressing persistence in the media, in the courts and down at the pub, continuing to reinforce road user complacency.***

Cyril Myerscough, Co Down, Chair Pedestrians Association, 1982 - 1991

### 3 'Accident' is not appropriate

*The word 'accident' should be replaced by words such as crash, incident, fatality or road death in official statements and documents*

**'Support for families of road death victims', 1994.**

This was the first recommendation of the two year Independent Working Party convened by Victim Support (the government funded charity for victims of crime whose mandate does not include road crash victims). This working group included representatives from the Home Office, CPS, Police, Coroners' Society, The British Association of A&E Medicine, as well as RoadPeace and other charities. RoadPeace provided road victim evidence for the two year work and report, based on 150 case studies.

Road crashes are sudden violent events that devastate families for decades, if not permanently. It is only right that the feelings and wishes of those who have suffered as the result of road crashes are respected.

Save 'accident' for spilled milk and minor occurrences, not for describing the leading cause of death and disability in the UK.

*...people do not have any idea of how upset and offended we feel when we hear the 'A' word, which seems to be intentionally belittling the devastation suffered by families of innocent loved ones, cruelly and needlessly killed or seriously injured in road traffic crashes caused by the criminal actions of another road user.*

Bridget Wall, RoadPeace East Anglia group

Terminology is important, not only out of respect for the feelings of those affected, but as set out previously - to ensure that proper priority is given to reducing the risk of crashes and ensuring a fitting response to loss of life and quality of life.

*It's not like he was murdered. It was only an accident* - words from a police officer in 2002 to bereaved mother, whose only son was killed by an uninsured driver who had driven through red lights.

***The first step in changing human behaviour must be to stop thinking in terms of accidents and to talk exclusively of crashes.***

Nicholas Faith, CRASH The limits of car safety, 1997.

<sup>1</sup> BMJ 2001; 322: 1320-1321

<sup>2</sup> Haddon, Suchman, and Klein (1989), National Committee for Injury Prevention and Control: Injury prevention: meeting the challenge.

<sup>3</sup> WHO (2004), Road Safety is No Accident: A Brochure for World Health Day 7 April 2004, 1-20, 2004, Geneva, WHO

<sup>4</sup> The Guardian, February 17, 1999

<sup>5</sup> www.http://www.transport.gov.uk/stellent/groups/dft\_rdsafety/documents/page/dft\_rdsafety\_026183-02.hcsp#P80\_15591).

**Note:** this briefing sheet was originally produced in 1996, updated in 2004 for the WHO Safe Roads Day and this latest version is a contribution to the first UN Global Road Safety Week, 23-29 April 2007.

RoadPeace has updated this briefing sheet for the first UN Global Road Safety Week. It also responds to the multi-million pound investigation, led by Sir John Stevens, into the road crash in which Diana, Princess of Wales was killed. This investigation concluded that it was a 'simple accident', while, perversely, at the same time confirming the involvement of a driver excessively over both the drink drive and speed limits. It may not have been a premeditated assassination, but the crash involved criminal behaviour and was certainly no accident.



**RoadPeace** dedicated to supporting road crash victims

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