Road Traffic Accidents
The Number One Killer in Libya

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To The Editor: It is estimated that 1.26 million people worldwide died in 2000 from road traffic accidents, 90% of them in low and middle-income countries. In 2000, the road traffic injury mortality rate for the world was 20.8 per 100,000 populations (30.8 in males, 11.0 in females) [1]. The Arab population constitutes 3.6% of the world's population and it owns 1% of the world's vehicles. Its human losses as a result of road traffic accidents (RTA) account for 4.8% of that of the world's losses [2]. It is estimated that the annual cost of road crashes is about 1% of the Gross National Product (GNP) in developing countries, 1.5 in transitional countries and 2% in highly motorised countries [3].

In Libya the situation is worse. It is a sad fact that road traffic accidents are the number one killer in Libya. As a matter of fact I consider it to be an ‘epidemic’ in all sectors of the Libyan society. There is not a day that goes by in Libya without us hearing about families, young men, women and children getting killed in horrific car accidents. It is alarming that young children are knocked down on a daily basis by speeding young drivers, whose understanding of driving skills may have been acquired from “playstation games”! (You can watch some of the shameful video clips sent by some of these drivers on this link http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=doWEDjHlVo)

I feel it is our responsibility as physicians observing the situation to raise awareness about the scale of the problem, possible causes, and how to tackle it.

Possible Causes

• A driving licence in Libya is not issued on the basis of how much you know. Therefore the majority of drivers know little or nothing about the law.

• Wearing seat belts is not compulsory in most parts of Libya. In some places, especially in the Eastern part of Libya, you could be penalised for wearing one. I was stopped many years ago by the traffic police in the Eastern part of Libya because I was wearing sunglasses and a seatbelt. I had to apologize profusely to the young traffic policeman and explain that I was wearing sunglasses because I was driving facing the sun! The reason for wearing the seatbelt was a habit from living abroad for many years and I was not a “show off” as he put it! This incidence made me wonder how much the traffic police knew about the law?

• In Libya the way we behave in the street, the way we drive and our attitude towards pedestrians is not taught in schools at an early age. As a matter of fact, many drivers think it is “cool” to scare pedestrians.

• Most of the accidents in Libya occur at school times but unfortunately no measures are taken by the traffic police to help young children to cross roads safely.

• Most of the road traffic accidents happen at the same areas but these are never identified as “black spots” to warn drivers of the possible dangers.

• Although Zebra Crossings exist in some parts of Libya, they actually do not serve the purpose. We just need to count how many pedestrians (especially foreign visitors) have been knocked down at Zebra Crossings.

• There is a need for new road signs, clear road markings (lanes), and new traffic lights to replace old and often non-functioning ones.

• One study demonstrated that speeding was responsible for about 70% of accidents [4]. There are no speed cameras or road humps to slow down speeding cars, therefore residents who have lost children to road traffic accidents resort to building their own version of street humps made from old pipes, thick ropes or cement.

• Most of the main roads are full of holes and in desperate need of maintenance.

• Car seats for children are not compulsory.

• When accidents happen in Libya, what number do we dial? Do emergency services exist?

• It is a known fact that most of the deaths and permanent disabilities in road traffic accidents are caused by people trying to help due to the lack of Advanced Trauma and Life Support (ATLS) trained personnel [5,6].

• It is well documented that Advanced Trauma and Life Support (ATLS) and Advanced Life Support (ALS) courses improve survival [5]. Unfortunately in Libya they are not compulsory for nurses or doctors. Some doctors and nurses working in the Emergency department are even unaware that these courses exist. Therefore, it is no surprise that the majority of car accident causalties dies or sustain permanent disabilities despite reaching the hospital in redeemable condition.
What can we do to help?

Ministry of Health

1. We must put pressure on the ministry of health and offer our services in running ATLS, ALS and Trauma courses to all medical personnel and paramedics. These courses should become a prerequisite for qualifying to work in the Medical field especially for those who directly deal with trauma patients.

2. All hospitals dealing with trauma must have well trained and well equipped trauma and cardiac arrest teams whose ATLS/ALS knowledge is revalidated periodically.

3. Emphasise the importance of introducing the Bleep/Page System.

4. Train paramedics and improve the Emergency Service [5,6].

5. Emergency phone numbers should exist and should be made free of charge to dial.

Ministry of Education

1. Educate children at an early age about behaviour in the street and dangers on the road.

2. The schools should share the responsibilities with the traffic police in ensuring the safety of pupils.

3. Supply posters and educate the public.

4. The United Nations invited member states and the international community to recognize the third Sunday in November of every year as the World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims as the appropriate acknowledgement for victims of road traffic crashes and their families. I think a union should be formed in Libya, of people who have lost relatives to car accidents to campaign and educate drivers as per recommendation of the UN [7].

Ministry of Transport

1. Re-validate the traffic police on their behaviour and knowledge of the law.

2. Revise and re-enforce the traffic law with strict monitoring and speed cameras.

3. Re-enforce Zebra Crossings with lights and give penalties to drivers who do not adhere.

4. It is a well known fact that financial penalties are more effective than other forms of penalties on re-enforcing the law.

5. Improve the conditions of the roads i.e. regular maintenance, road markings, road humps, traffic lights, road mirrors and road signs.

6. Re-validate the driving licences with written and practical exams.

7. Roadside assistance through a mobile workshop / emergency phones by the roadside.

8. Only road-worthy vehicles should be allowed on the road through re-enforcement of a safety certification system for vehicles.

9. Regulate the issue and distribution of driving licences and vehicle safety certification through the use of IT (Information Technology) systems.

10. It is about time that a national policy for injury prevention and control in Libya should be formed thorough the coordination between different ministries, departments and the various agencies concerned.

These are the suggestions and visions of one person but I am sure that many of you will share my views.

References

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