

PHI-ASIANET NEWS

Survey on Road Traffic Injuries and observing

World Day of Remembrance of Road Traffic Injury Victims

World Day of Remembrance of Road Traffic Injury victims on the third Sunday (20th) of November was observed in a novel way by People's Health Initiative in association with Asianet News, the most popular news channel in Kerala. The novel mass communication initiative was aimed at realizing the theme of the day "Remember and Reflect, Remember and Respond".

Volunteers and Associates of PHI from the five government medical colleges conducted a snap- survey of road traffic injury victims brought to the emergency rooms of hospitals attached to all the five medical colleges. The data was collected on a proforma designed for the purpose. The number of victims arriving at each hour was relayed to the central unit. Statistics regarding major injuries and the state of alcoholic intoxication of the victims were collected. This was relayed to the news desk of Asianet News which displayed this information live for the whole day on the news channel. The news crew of the channel rose up to the occasion and came up with news stories that reflected the callous way we handle our traffic, to end up as the most accident prone state in India.

In a culture obsessed with festivals the need for observing a day is all the more pronounced. Trauma is emerging as the single most important cause of preventable death in the most productive segment of the society , males in the age group of 18 to 45.

The results of the survey was alarming and an eye opener. During the period of survey a total of 209 RTI victims were brought to the medical colleges. (TVM 76, KTM 36 ALP 27 TCR 19 KKD 51) . 38% of these victims were drunken at the time of admission to emergency room. 20% of these were major injuries as assessed by the duty doctors. The emergency rooms of the 5 medical colleges were the sole providers of trauma care till a decade ago. However private hospitals including medical college hospitals have started providing trauma care in considerable measure during this period . The actual proportion of trauma care in private sector is unknown. However the true figures for the entire state is likely to be at least 3 – 5 times higher, considering the fact that 70 % of health care in Kerala is in private sector and minor injuries are taken care of at primary and secondary levels of government health services.

What was an everyday fact to trauma surgeons of the state came out thunderously in the survey. 38% of the victims in survey was drunken. The official statistics regarding drunken driving as a cause of accidents is only a negligible 0.002% as per data available in the website of Kerala Police. Though the survey did not look at the specific question of proportion of accidents attributable to drunken driving, this mammoth discrepancy in figures can lead us only to one conclusion - a large majority of drunken drivers go scotfree in our society enabling them to repeat the crime, again and again.

The Motor Vehicles Act, 1988 stipulates a maximum permissible level of 30 mg per 100 ml of blood. Currently drunkenness is assessed in the emergency room in an unscientific manner – recording whether the patient has smell of alcohol in his breath. Blood level of alcohol is never assessed as part of medical examination of the injured.

WHO estimates that enforcing a drinking and driving law could reduce alcohol-related crashes by 20% globally. PHI estimates that the enforcement of scientific methods of documentation of blood alcohol concentration will bring down the accidents by as much as 50% in Kerala.

The incidence of suicide, alcoholism, diabetes, degenerative diseases are all very high in Kerala. Partly these are due to the epidemiological transition we are undergoing which has inverted the population pyramid so that people over 60 constitutes a substantial base of the pyramid. Appropriate preparedness and interventions by health care systems can effectively manage the challenges posed by many of these threats.

However the modern day epidemic of trauma deaths has its roots outside the domain of medicine. Primary prevention starts at constructing roads scientifically. If roads are not designed properly , enforcement of traffic laws become impossible and stressed drivers will behave erratically. Kerala contributes of 12% of accidents reported at national level though we have only 3% of roads in India. The social cost of road accidents in Kerala is estimated at Rs. 6,600 Crores annually. It is estimated that simple credit creation and investing it in delivering well organized care to the victims of trauma can bring down these figures by as much as 50%.

But the policy makers seems blissfully oblivious about this alarming situation. The high-speed access controlled corridor , which would have provided modern pathway to the modern cars , isolated pedestrians from speeding cars, virtually abolished head-on collisions; still remains a distant dream. The policy makers seems to be heading in a direction that is diametrically opposite to the one in which we need to go if we are to control trauma deaths. The unanimity in demanding that width of highways be brought down to 30 meters instead of the national standards of 60 is a manifestation of this shortsightedness. It is in this context that PHI decided to conduct this social experiment- streaming live statistics of the number of traffic injury victims on Asianet News; as a novel way of observing World Day of Remembrance. The aim was to persuade all those who are involved in management and prevention of traffic injury, to “Remember and Reflect” on the situation.

It may be noted that when the leading channel focused on a good cause the other channels followed suit in the coming days. The focus shifted from irrelevant rants of politicians to socially relevant issues, exactly like the desire of Dr.Abdul Kalam , the most charismatic president in recent times.

PHI do not consider it is time for complacency. On the contrary the second part of the moto of World Day of Remembrance viz “Remember and respond” remains unfulfilled. It shall be our endeavor to continue sensitizing the collective unconscious of Kerala society about the need to intervene effectively, so that bread winners of the society return home safely in the evening. We look forward to more innovative interventions in partnership with organizations with a sense of social responsibility among which yours' occupies a prime position.