Subject: Safety First
Date: Sat, 11 Mar 2000 21:41:49 +0530
From: "DOLKE" <aaasn@nagpur.dot.net.in>
To: "Medico Friend Circle" <mfriendcircle@netscape.net>

I think Sathyu will be interested in this article.

Arun

http://www.timesofindia.com/060300/06intw1.htm

Safety First

The World Conference on Injury Prevention and Control, sponsored by WHO and
the Collaborating Centres on Injury Control and Safety Promotion Worldwide
is being held in Delhi from March 5 through 8. On the eve of the conference
which will be hosted. by Indian Institute of Technology, New Delhi, Dr
Dinesh Mohan, Henry Ford professor for Transportation Safety and Injury
Prevention at IIT, Delhi, talks to Mona Mehta about people's right to safety
and steps needed to control injury which is major public health problem in
India.

What is the basic theme of this conference which will be attended by
delegates from 58 countries?

The basic theme is to promote an understanding on safety in various walks of
life by incorporating knowledge from different disciplines like engineering,
public health, medicine, law, psychology and community behaviour. Second, to
share experiences and blend perspectives from various countries.

Is injury control a major public health problem in India?

Injury is a disease defined as damage caused to the human body by the
exchange of energy. Interestingly, even the Susruta Samhita, the old Indian
text on medicine, considers injury caused by accidents to be a disease.
Approximately 800,000 people die of injury in India every year, of which 85
per cent are below the age of 50. The number of people killed per year due
to road accidents alone is approximately 70,000, and those seriously injured
ranges between 15 to 20 lakhs. If you compare these figures with the number
of people who die every year from diseases like cancer, pneumonia, AIDS and
heart disease you realise that the latter get importance far beyond the
actual loss to society.

Why is it difficult for policy makers to institute safety promotion and
injury prevention programmes in India, is it because people in India are not
bothered?

Surveys have revealed that nearly 70 per cent of the people are willing to
accept the law and it is incorrect to say that people are not bothered. If
that was the case, people would not burn buses or beat up the driver
whenever he causes an accident. The main hurdle is that of poverty; poverty
of theory, design and adequate work in the area which will help develop
policies that work in India.

Why can't we simply adopt foreign models and implement them in India?

It is not enough to transfer policies from abroad. Take, for instance, the
area of road safety. Western countries have mainly worked on making safer
motor vehicles, so even if we applied the same safety standards for cars in
India, the death rate would decrease by about one per cent only, since car
occupants comprise less than five per cent of all road accidents in India.
Here we have to take into account issues ranging from helmet design and

safety of three wheelers, trucks, buses to pedestrian and cyclist safety.

Every now and then the government does initiate traffic safety programmes like safety weeks, declaring the "Year for Road Safety for the Child" etc., why don't these help in creating an accident-free environment?

Such programmes only create awareness about the problem but do not provide any solutions. Behavioural change comes about by change in the design of the environment and change in regulations which are enforceable. If you want to regulate speed of traffic in the city, for instance, you might want to turn the crossings into roundabouts. The traffic automatically slows down at the roundabouts, that kind of design change promotes behavioural change and, in turn, reduces accident rates in that area. An easily enforceable change could be a law that every two-wheeler should keep its headlights on even during the day. Research in Malaysia and Singapore has shown that by keeping their headlights on even during the day, two wheelers make it easier for fellow drivers to notice them in their peripheral vision. This measure has brought about a drop in the accident rate by 10 per cent and compelled the drivers to keep their headlights in working condition. A low cost and easily enforceable example for bicycles could be use of reflectors and painting them yellow for greater visibility on the roads.

Do you agree with William Haddon, pioneer in injury control research, who said that it is mistake to always focus on human error as the main cause behind an accident?

That is the basic principle of dealing with prevention of accidents. There are very few things that go wrong in the world that are not due to human error. But if the system was designed better, you would have actually got rid of the problem. At home for instance, if your bed is not very high, or there is a carpet or dhurry around the bed, the probability of a serious injury reduces dramatically if a child was to fall off the bed. That is if you had a safe design, or forgiving system in place no matter how or who uses it, it would be safe.

What kind of infrastructure do we have in India to create policies and designs suitable for our conditions?

Safety is a part of our fundamental right to life but unfortunately, we don't really have much of an infrastructure at the administrative, academic or policy level to treat this issue in a scientific and feasible manner. It is very difficult to reduce accidents unless formal policies are made and work done on a continuous basis. Take the area of traffic accidents. At present there are only two groups in the country which focus on accidents studies, one being Transport Research and Injury Prevention Programme at IIT, Delhi and other being the Centre for Road Research Institute, both of which are subcritical in size. The Dangerous Machines Act recognises that getting hurt at work is violating your fundamental rights but because we have not had any scientific thrust in this area there is no serious policy on this issue. The two agencies, National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health in Ahmedabad and Factory Advisory Service in Mumbai working on the subject of occupational accidents have limited budgets and are unable to study occupational accidents in depth. The main agency to usher in any changes in a society has always been the government. Like the western countries who have been initiating safety promotion regulations based on scientific investigation, expertise and analysis since the past three to four decades, our government must also evolve policies on how to tackle this situation on a national basis. It needs to set up formal task groups manned by professionals who will work on the area continuously and permanently and give the policy guidelines for work to be done for India specific issues. A separate department for traffic safety in the ministry of surface transport needs to be set up for any meaningful action.