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Researchers at the Center for Transportation Safety at the Texas Transportation Institute are dedicated to investigating and implementing solutions to alcohol-related issues. Also in this issue is an article on the inaugural Traffic Safety Conference hosted by the Center for Transportation Safety.

A Profile of Dr. Maury Dennis
A look at the research of Dr. Dennis, who has dedicated over 30 years to reducing alcohol-related fatalities.

Drinking and Riding
Alcohol-related deaths while riding motorcycles are a huge problem. Read about the safety outreach efforts of CTS.

Community Involvement and Underage Drinking
CTS Researcher Melissa Walden has recently started a project that takes a community-involvement approach to preventing underage drinking.

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Dr. Maury Dennis: A Career Dedicated to Alcohol-Related Research

By Rick Davenport

With thirty years of alcohol education and research under his belt, Dr. Maury Dennis has formed some strong opinions about how to make our roads safer. He acknowledges the important strides that have been made since 1980 in getting drunk drivers off the road, but he doesn’t think they’re enough.

Alcohol is a factor in 40 percent of all fatality crashes in the United States today, down from about 60 percent 30 years ago. That’s after a decades-long effort that includes tougher enforcement through new laws and programs designed to raise awareness about the dangers associated with drinking and driving.

“There’s been a crush of media attention and legislative action regarding intoxicated drivers, but it’s clear that we are not doing enough of the right things,” says Dennis, a senior research scientist with the Texas Transportation Institute’s Center for Transportation Safety (CTS). “We have reached a plateau, so my prime focus with CTS is to develop effective education and awareness programs and offer some innovative ideas to lower this unacceptable percentage of alcohol-related crashes.”

For example, Dennis would like to see legislation that requires bartenders and servers to attend training to recognize the effects of alcohol on customers. “I realize this idea may be unpopular with some bar and restaurant owners, but if we are serious about improving road safety, I think we need to start there,” he says. Dennis points out that about half of all DWI offenses occur with drivers who were drinking at establishments. “Bartenders and servers are our first and last lines of defense.”

Although Dennis is a recent employee with CTS, he brings with him a wealth of experience related to transportation safety. Most recently, he was the coordinator of the Safety Education Program at Texas A&M University, a job he held for nearly 30 years. During that time, Dennis worked with private and state agencies including the Texas Department of Transportation, the Texas Education Agency and the American Automobile Association.

Dennis is a sought-after speaker for alcohol-related conferences and often testifies as an expert witness in criminal and civil trials for both the prosecution and defense. He’s published more than 100 articles and been involved in more than 200 projects, with the majority of them focusing on alcohol and drug education and research.

“We are very fortunate to have Dr. Maury Dennis on our team at CTS,” says Center Director John Mounce. “Alcohol is the number one crash factor in Texas and the nation, so it is imperative that we do all we can to make an impact in this area. Dennis’s presence at CTS will give us a great head start.”

“My experience has taught me that most people think they perform better the more they drink,” Dennis says. “That carries over to the drinking driver, too. It’s that perception that I’d like to change.”
Testing Drinking Drivers: How Much Is Too Much?

By Rick Davenport

During Maury Dennis’ lifelong career focusing on alcohol awareness and education, one study he conducted made a lasting impression. “That study made it very clear,” he recalls. “Operating a vehicle after even small amounts of alcohol is dangerous, and we have video to prove it.”

The study was conducted in 2000 at Texas A&M University’s Riverside Campus as part of Dennis’ work with the University’s Center for Alcohol and Drug Education Studies (CADES). About twenty men and women of all sizes, ages and ethnic backgrounds agreed to be tested. Half of them would perform various driving skills sober; the other half would perform the same driving maneuvers after drinking alcohol. The drinking group’s blood-alcohol concentrations (BACs) were tested at regular intervals.

“We expected the drinkers to perform poorly once they reached legal intoxication (.08 BAC),” Dennis said. “But even after a beer or two, the drivers had noticeable changes in complex reaction time, balance and judgment and decision making in driving situations.”

Dennis believes that the results of the test show why 40 percent of all fatality crashes involve alcohol, even though the driver was not necessarily legally intoxicated. “Our test was performed during daylight hours after the drivers were trained. Most alcohol-related accidents happen at night in non-controlled situations,” Dennis points out.

The 12-minute video of the study, provided by TTI Communications’ video group, has been widely used in law enforcement agencies, driver education classes and DWI education programs.

So how much alcohol is too much? “In a perfect world, people would not drive at all after drinking. It’s obviously a personal decision,” Dennis said. “The study pointed out that most people thought they would perform well after drinking. They were all proven wrong.”
Drinking and Riding

By Joanna Dickens

Nationally, motorcycle deaths are up for the ninth year in a row, totaling more than 4,810 in 2006. While they only comprise a small fraction of road users, motorcyclists now account for 11 percent of all traffic fatalities. Preliminary 2006 data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) shows that every category of driving fatalities has decreased compared to last year, except for one: motorcycles.

Per vehicle mile traveled, motorcyclists are about 34 times more likely to die in a crash than people riding in cars, and eight times more likely to be injured. Many factors contribute to the dangers such as rider experience, other motorists’ awareness and protective gear use. But one of the biggest risks to riding is also the one of the most preventable: alcohol.

With all the efforts to reduce drunk driving, our nation has seen a promising decline in alcohol-related vehicle crashes over the past few decades. Alcohol involvement in motorcycle fatalities is also on the decline, but motorcyclists still have the highest intoxication rate of all road users involved in fatal crashes. In 2005, 27 percent of all fatally injured motorcycle operators were legally intoxicated, and an additional 7 percent of operators had alcohol levels under the legal limit.

Research shows that successful traffic safety programs implemented at the local level usually include a media component, law enforcement and partnerships with a variety of community organizations. Patricia Turner, an associate research scientist for the Center for Transportation Safety (CTS) at the Texas Transportation Institute, recently headed a project team researching strategies to reduce alcohol-impaired motorcycle operation for NHTSA.

“One of the initiatives that CTS is involved with is developing safety materials such as billboards, brochures and videos for the Look Learn Live campaign,” says Turner. “This was a very important step since nothing had been developed since the early 1990s.”

Other state programs, such as Connecticut’s Open the Throttle–Not the Bottle, educate specific target groups about the risks of drinking and riding while promoting positive social norms of not riding while impaired or intoxicated. Deterrence strategies, such as training law enforcement to recognize impaired motorcyclists and setting up sobriety checkpoints, create a high-visibility, zero-tolerance atmosphere in a community. Partnerships with local rider groups or taverns help provide safe rides home.

While research reveals the effectiveness of interventions for drinking and driving, the effectiveness of drinking and riding interventions is still unknown. “Any strategy taken by a community should help reduce alcohol-related motorcycle crashes, but more research is needed to find the most effective methods of prevention,” says Turner.
Community Involvement – The Key to Curbing Underage Drinking

By Chris Sasser

Underage drinking by American youths is a cultural problem that begins at the community level. And, according to CTS Research Scientist Melissa Walden, alcohol education must begin in communities.

This was the message of Walden’s presentation at the Save a Life Summit in Fort Worth, Texas, on August 20. Walden is about to begin work on a statewide project with the goal of assessing the effectiveness of community action teams (CATs). The goal of CATs is the prevention of underage drinking. Other project partners include sponsoring agency the Texas Department of Transportation, LeaderServices, national trainers and trained assessors from around the state.

"Most people are aware that underage drinking is a problem," says Walden. "But parents and other adults underestimate the number of youths using alcohol, the amount consumed and the risks taken while under the influence."

CAT is an approach that addresses underage drinking through team assessments and localized strategic planning. The philosophy is to teach the community to identify problems and develop appropriate countermeasures. "The community needs to take ownership of their own problem and create solutions that fit their unique needs," says Walden. Target areas include education, law enforcement, prevention and public policy.

Early returns on the effectiveness of the CAT process have been favorable. "The planning process was excellent," says Steven Ebell of Eanes ISD. The result of the initial time spent has been increased recognition of the problem and ongoing dialogue about the actions we can take as a community to prevent underage drinking. We are well on our way to the implementation of real solutions to combat the deadly issue of underage drinking."

By Rick Davenport

The inaugural gathering of traffic safety professionals, policymakers and practitioners was a rousing success, according to John Mounce, director of the Texas Transportation Institute's Center for Transportation Safety. Mounce moderated the conference.

The 2008 Traffic Safety Conference was held in Houston, Texas, November 17-19, 2008. The Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) hosted the event in conjunction with the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) and the Houston-Galveston Area Council.

“We achieved our primary goal of bringing together various constituencies devoted to reducing fatalities on our highways,” explains Mounce. “Everyone at that conference was, in some way, a problem-solver.”

The conference began with a video on crashes designed to show just how important getting the word out about traffic safety is. A recurring theme throughout was the importance of education and increased awareness in motivating individuals to take responsibility and help create a “safety culture” on the roadway. This term refers to an emerging philosophy that acknowledges the idea that engineering innovations and law enforcement can only do so much to keep drivers, pedestrians and riders safe. What is ultimately needed is a change in the way we, as individual users of the transportation system, view and use the system itself.

Speakers addressed a myriad of traffic safety issues, including impaired driving, motorcycle safety, young drivers, law enforcement, federal initiatives, alcohol/drug traffic offender adjudication, red-light camera enforcement, occupant protection issues for Texas, and various emerging traffic safety issues.

Carlos Lopez, traffic operations director for TxDOT noted that Texas is the only state where traffic deaths have actually declined five years in a row, even though the state’s population jumped from almost 21 million to over 23 million between 2001 and 2006. Yet motorcycle-related fatalities have increased dramatically, as noted by Dr. Jeff Michael of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Speaker after speaker noted that there is clearly room for improving safety in the Lone Star State, and motivating individual behavioral change is key to making that happen.

Texas State Representative Jim Murphy, member of the House Transportation Committee, spoke in the final
session, devoted to state legislative issues. He reviewed the legislative agenda for 2009 and discussed the political realities that surround implementing safety solutions. Sometimes it’s not technical knowledge or even political will that’s the driving force in improving traffic safety. Sometimes it’s the “power of persistence” of the public in setting safety as a priority through legislation that really drives it forward.

"Many attendees, from many professions and levels of responsibility were very complimentary of the forum and information shared here," explains Mounce. "Based on the attendance and responses from attendees, I believe the next conference will be even more successful."
In the News

http://whosdrivingtonight.org/

"Every day in Texas, four people die in a crash involving alcohol. Those of us at the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) want you to live a long and happy life, not one that ends tragically on the highway after you, or someone else, has had too much to drink.

With the help of some friends, we developed this website to make a point: Alcohol and asphalt are a lousy combination. So, if you’ve been drinking, let someone else take the wheel.”

Helmets Reduce Injuries

Two recent articles that have appeared in the media citing research that proves the use of helmets reduces injuries:

http://www.themonitor.com/articles/people_17263_article.html/call_help.html