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ALCOHOL AT THE WHEEL

Robert V. Seliger

The late Robert V. Seliger, M.D., was Executive Director of the National Committee on Alcohol Hygiene, Inc. with headquarters in Baltimore, Maryland, a Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association, and Chief Psychiatrist at the Neuropsychiatric Institute of Baltimore. This paper is the sixth report on the Social Ills of America which had been prepared under the auspices of the Committee on Alcohol Hygiene.—EDITOR.

With the rapid advance in automotive engineering in the United States, the development of high speed highways, the widely increasing use of the automobile, and resultant heavy traffic, the drinking driver has become one of the nation's most serious accident hazards. In a ten year study conducted in Cleveland, Ohio, by Dr. S. R. Gerber, it was determined that in more than 50% of automobile fatalities the use of alcohol was involved. Even more startling was the disclosure that the greatest number of killers at the wheel were in the so-called "moderate" drinking class.

One recent example of the relation of alcohol to accidents and traffic also shows how inadequate are our laws to cope with the situation. Last winter a car moved down a busy thoroughfare in a large Eastern city, mowed down three pedestrians at an intersection, and came to a stop. A man got out of the car; a crowd gathered; the police arrived; ambulances screeched to the scene. One of the three pedestrians was injured. The other two were dead. The man in the car admitted to having had "a couple of beers." He walked unsteadily and a toxicologist found the alcohol content of his blood above the intoxication standard. Nevertheless, a judge found him *not* guilty of manslaughter because there was no evidence of gross negligence or wilful disregard of human life. And at a later trial on reckless and drunken driving charges, he was acquitted because it was *not* proved that he was driving the automobile. At the conclusion of the first trial, the judge said the pedestrians "were struck by a man who, perhaps, if he had *not* been drinking would *not* have struck them."

Science bears out the remarks of the judge. Alcohol diminishes the acuteness of sensory perception. It delays or weakens motor performances and physical coordination, and thus many times it causes serious automobile crashes.

Tests have shown that a few drinks make a drinker react more slowly in emergencies. He is inclined to be less cautious at the wheel than he would ordinarily be. He takes more chances and generally drives at a greater speed. These are general results and may vary with individuals.

It is also true that the effect of several drinks on the same person may vary from time to time. The general pattern is so unmistakable, however, that the only conclusion that can be drawn is that a driver should *not* drink, and a drinker should *not* drive.

That would be the simple way to prevent many of our most serious accidents. Many people now living would not be dead next month if the recommendation were followed.

It is especially urgent in the light of reports from every state which show that the number of registered motor vehicles and licensed operators is increasing tremendously. In Maryland, a state with high per capita ownership of automobiles, the number of licensed vehicles has increased 50% in the last ten years. At the same time the number of residents seeking driving permits has increased 100%. In 1951 there were 159,738 applications for instruction licenses. This increase in the number of autos and drivers, in itself, compounds the accident problem.

As recently as November 7, 1952, Magistrate Eugene R. Canudo, of New York City, observed that "the motor vehicle . . . is the greatest single instrument of death in our community." He noted that the annual auto toll in New York alone runs to 500 deaths, more than 33,000 personal injuries "and untold millions of dollars of property damage."

When the increased use of alcohol is added to the increase in autos and drivers, the picture becomes terrifying. It is certainly true that in many accidents the drinking driver is not involved. Many other factors play a part—carelessness, impaired vision, road conditions, excessive speed, weather, and mechanical failure, to name a few. But police records prove that the drinking driver—*not* necessarily the drunken driver, either—is more accident-prone than the driver in full control of his faculties.

One insurance company, noting that 8,000 people were killed in 1951 in traffic accidents where liquor was a factor, is offering casualty insurance at a preferred rate to non-drinking drivers and has adopted this slogan: "If you don't drink, why help pay for the accidents of those who do?" It has realized that the total abstainer is a better risk as a driver.

In the field of mass public transportation, the drinking driver is taboo. Railroads, bus services and air lines have recognized alcohol as a killer when it controls the throttle and have forbidden their operators to drink. The engineer of a train is responsible for the safe transportation of several hundred people at most. Although he is *not* alone at the controls, anticipates running into no oncoming traffic, and is guided by automatic switches and signal towers, he must remain sober.

How much greater is the responsibility of the automobile driver, who in the course of a short run may encounter 5,000 people! The drinking driver assumes the risk of injuring or killing one or more of those 5,000 people. He also faces the risk of encountering other drinking drivers. Moral courtesy demands that an individual taking the wheel be in his best physical and mental state. He also owes that debt to himself.

Of course, the operator of the automobile is *not* always to blame in accidents where pedestrians are the victims. Pedestrians are often careless, violating traffic laws, walking against red lights, jaywalking, or stepping into the street without checking for traffic.

This brings up another serious menace—that of the drinking pedestrian. The effects of alcohol upon one's physical behavior are *not* confined to the person at the wheel. The pedestrian is equally vulnerable, and he endangers his own life by stepping into the traffic stream with a few drinks under his belt. Like the driver who drinks, the drinking pedestrian is less capable of quick action and clear judgment; his vision may be impaired, and the sense of well-being the alcohol gives him may well be a death trap.

The frequency with which accidents traceable to alcohol occur indicates that there is a need for a vigorous campaign toward educating all motorists to the dangers of driving while drinking. It is also important that the public be so aroused to the menace of the drinking driver that the passive tolerance of traffic rules will be replaced by an active demand for the protection of strong laws and rigid enforcement where drink and driving are concerned.

It must be remembered that the auto is as lethal a weapon as a loaded gun. The drinking driver has his finger on the trigger, and in any small emergency he may pull it. If a killer with a loaded gun stalked the streets of one of our cities—and we have seen a few cases of that—the public would be aroused to a frenzy and every available policeman would be out trying to track him down. In the drinking driver we have a potential killer loose in every city, and capable of taking thousands of lives. Yet toward this situation the general public is apathetic.

The awful significance of alcohol at the wheel has failed to reach the individual citizen. All the warnings and precautionary advice are regarded as fine—but meant for the other fellow. The average citizen abhors the thought of the drinking driver—when it is someone else. It has *not* been made clear to him that when he has had a few drinks and slides behind the wheel, he is the drinking driver.

This lack of concern over the problem is one of the factors underlying the increase in accidents stemming from drinking. Others include laxity

in the enforcement of existing laws; "toothless" laws which are too easily defeated; inability of the investigating officers to prove intoxication; and the "holiday exemption" attitude, which leads citizens to believe that at such festive times of the year as Christmas, New Year's, and Thanksgiving, when drinking is customary, infractions of the law should be overlooked.

To help curb this grave threat, the following steps are recommended:

1. The passage of stronger laws with stiffer penalties to cover cases of driving under the influence of intoxicating beverages.
2. More vigorous enforcement of those laws at the local level.
3. Automatic permanent loss of driving licenses upon conviction of a traffic offense involving the use of alcohol, with other states to be notified so that the offender would be denied a driving license in all states.
4. Compulsory tests for the detection of alcohol in every fatal traffic accident.
5. Provision for the use and acceptance in court of the evidence of drunk-driving test devices. Various tests have been devised and are now in use to some extent. They are available in forms which make the test through the breath, blood, or urine. While each has its own distinct advantages, any one of them is generally sufficient to give an accurate indication of the state of the driver's sobriety. During 1951 such tests were used to some extent in 42 states, but only 14 states have legislation calling for their use.

While some of these suggestions may seem harsh, it must be remembered that the problem of the drinking driver is not one calling for a "soft" policy. "Weak" laws have failed to control the menace. It can be argued, and with some justification, that the revocation of one's driving license might work a hardship upon him, especially if he depended upon the use of his car for his livelihood. One can adjust to hardship; death is much more permanent. When we consider the number of fathers wiped out by the drinking driver, the number of children permanently disabled, the loss of a driving license is a small penalty.

Any legal step that can be taken to cut down the toll of death and injuries caused by alcohol is not too much to ask for. The drinking driver is a killer on wheels. We must keep him off the road.