EVANS RESPONDS

(Note: Complete details of the author’s calculations and references to source data not referenced here are given in the links at http://www.scienceservingsociety.com/aphlLetter.htm.)

Vernick and Teret are quite correct in stating that in the 35 years from 1966 to 2001 the US fatality rate (number of traffic deaths per million miles) declined by more than 70% (72%, in fact). In the first 35 years for which data are available (1921 to 1956), the rate declined by 75%. How can litigation and vehicle regulation be important factors in recent declines when somewhat larger declines occurred before the emergence of such factors?

In my editorial I noted that prior to the 1970s we had the safest traffic in the world but that, as measured by the number of deaths per million vehicles, we had sunk to 13th place. We are now in 15th place, behind Australia, Austria, Great Britain, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland. McKay is quite correct that greater emphasis on drunk driving and use of safety belts contributes to superior safety in other countries, although other law violations, especially speeding, are similarly important.1-3

If the United States had appointed safety officials to consider safety belt laws, which soon became widespread in other countries after Australia’s 1971 success, many of the additional 300,000 Americans killed would have lived. The ideologically driven anti-technicals lawyers directing US safety policy did not merely not support safety belt laws—they even denied the effectiveness of safety belts. One of the justifications Joan Claybrook (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration administrator, 1977-1980) offered to support mandating airbags was that their installation cost would be partially offset by cost savings from removing seat belts.4 In a 1983 television interview, Claybrook stated that airbags were “much better than seat belts” and that seat belts were “the most rejected technology we have.”5,6 By the early 1970s the technical literature documented that airbags could not approach the effectiveness of belts.7 Belts reduce driver fatality risk by 42%,8 airbags by 8%.9

The core of our safety failure is the rhetoric and advocacy of lawyers had more influence in determining technical matters than the data and analysis of scientists. The most tragic aspect of this is that we refuse to learn. Those responsible for our disaster are not discredited—indeed, in an extraordinary irony, the media refer to them as “safety advocates.” What is worse still, the most important elected official with safety responsibilities, Senator John McCain, has his door open to Claybrook7 but closed to science.

Vehicle factors play a role in traffic safety, but driver behavior plays a vastly more important role. US policy, with its obsessive focus on vehicle factors, has already killed hundreds of thousands of Americans. Until we, like other nations, develop policies that seriously address driver behavior, additional thousands will be needlessly killed.

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References