



Mitigating Death and Disability— On and Off the Highway



The year is 1965. The scene is a two-lane highway on a rainy night. A sleepy driver loses control of his car and veers off the slick pavement. The car rolls, causing serious injuries—a punctured lung, a broken femur, and brain damage. A passing motorist sees the crash, and stops to help. Precious minutes pass before another motorist is able to reach a phone and call for help.

An ambulance, operated by the local mortuary, though just 5 miles away, arrives 45 minutes after the incident. The attendants, with just a few hours of first aid training and limited equipment, scoop up the victim in a converted hearse and go to the nearest hospital, which has few emergency resources. The victim dies despite everyone's best efforts.

That year over 47,000 people died on America's roads, a rate of 5.30 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled. With that alarming statistic in mind, one year later the National Academy of Science published the seminal white paper "Accidental Death and Disability: The Neglected Disease of Modern Society." The report ushered in engineering and safety improvements in cars and in highway design, and also addressed the care for crash victims. While focused on the carnage on America's highways, the recommendations transformed emergency care in every setting, marking the introduction of modern Emergency Medical Services (EMS).

That sleepy driver in 1965 would likely have lived today, if not because seat belts, airbags, rumble strips, and road guards can prevent serious injury, but additionally because of the efficiency of our 911 system and emergency communications, trained responders with the right equipment, air medical helicopters, and the resources of a trauma center all worked the way they were designed to...and all inspired by the white paper.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), part of the U.S. Department of Transportation, was created in 1970 in response to the efforts of many people, including the authors of the 1966 white paper. Its mission includes keeping America's motorists safe, which also means promoting an effective emergency care system. The Office of EMS, a part of NHTSA, not only carries forward that mission but extends it to every location where an emergency may occur, working collaboratively with our many Federal partners.

In 2009, 33,963 people died in roadway incidents, a rate of 1.16 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled. This is a reduction of 78% since 1965, despite population growth and a major increase in the number of miles driven by Americans. We are proud of that achievement, but we know there is so much more we can do.

EMS Week is an important opportunity for you in EMS to reinforce the message of safety and injury prevention to the public. Also, it is a time to celebrate the critical role you have played in mitigating illness and injury, not only on our Nation's highways, but in every aspect of American life. We at NHTSA salute the EMTs and paramedics who have contributed so significantly to our Nation's welfare.

David Strickland
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