

## Road safety is very much a public health concern

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Amidst the preoccupation about violence in schools, cases of indiscipline during the National Service programme and the contentious issues regarding the measles vaccine, the World Health Day passed almost unnoticed last week.

Malaysians it seemed had too much on their plates to be reminded of another devastating unresolved issue – road safety.

This year's theme for the World Health Day is "Road Safety is No Accident". It is very appropriate for Malaysians since many of our road tragedies are indeed "no accident".

As mentioned by the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, in conjunction with the occasion, road safety can prevent needless suffering.

"Despite enormous improvement in road safety in some countries over the past few decades, nearly 1.2 million people are killed every year in road traffic crashes around the world, noted Annan.

This is more than 3,000 deaths every day. In addition, between 20 and 50 million are injured annually.

This is definitely a horrendous increase since the first recorded road accident that occurred in London on Aug 17, 1896. It involved a car, newly manufactured by the Anglo-French car company.

At the inquest, the coroner declared that this must not happen again. But it is a sad situation today.

Road traffic accidents ranked among the top three in the world and easily qualifies as another form of violence which is neglected.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) together with the World Bank has published a 217-page report – *World Report on Road Traffic Injury Prevention* – detailing the human and economic costs of road accidents. The Report admits that road safety is 'a major but neglected public health problem'.

Thus far the question of road safety is regarded more as a transportation issue rather than a public health issue. By adopting the current theme, the issue at hand could be given a new perspective.

"It tells an important truth, one that gives reasons for hope road traffic injuries can be prevented if they are recognized as a serious public health problem and if governments and others take necessary action to prevent them," says WHO.

Ironically the safest and most affordable form of road transport is said to be the bus as measured by the number of accidents per distance traveled per person.



Preventable: About 1.2 million people are killed yearly in road crashes worldwide.

Unfortunately, in most cases the bus services is perhaps the least developed form of transport in many developing countries, including Malaysia.

In some countries, it has been left unattended, putting the public in a difficult situation.

This invariably will lead to the increasing use of personal transport, namely cars and motorcycles, unmatched with improvement in road safety. Thus the cycle of "violence" continues.

This is more so in the Third World where motorcycles are said to be among the major road killers.

Perhaps Malaysian can very well related to this based on the number of accidents involving motorcycles.

This is despite the many attempts being made to make riding motorcycles safer by having laws such as wearing of crash helmets and "riding bright". However, there is still room for improvement, especially in road construction that fails to handle the variety of traffic converging on the road.

Motorcycles often have to compete for right of way in highly congested roads, or they become a menace to other road users.

In both cases, they are road hazards that are preventable. Ideally, different types of traffic should be directed to different roads specifically designed for each type.

Another cause for concern is the use of illicit drugs and alcohol by drivers.

Evidently this problem is quite rampant in Malaysia and it has claimed many innocent lives.

This column has highlighted this issue several times previously, in particular drunk driving (Poison Control, Aug 24, 2003)

However, it is largely still an unresolved problem while beer advertisements grow in proportion in the mass media.

World Health Day is just the day that we need to focus on outstanding issues that merit the world's attention, in the case road safety.

It is therefore opportune that we should look for ways to highlight issues related to road safety and place it in the forefront of the national agenda as a public health concern.

To date, it has been acknowledged that many countries do not put much effort into understanding relevant issues that could eliminate road traffic deaths and injuries as they are not viewed as a health problem.

By 2020, when Malaysia achieves developed nation status, the overall global figures for road traffic deaths and disabilities will rise by nearly two-thirds.

It would be interesting to see whether by then Malaysia's transport system will be at par with its developed nation status. Or will it languish in the Third World mess as we know it today.

No doubt the journey out of the Third World mindset can be a long bumpy ride ahead, but not if we know for sure the road that leads towards the light at the end of the tunnel.

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