

## **Prevention of drunk driving requires enhanced monitoring**

**Alcohol stop checks in traffic should be conducted also during rush hour, so that all the passers-by get the feeling that surveillance is comprehensive, writes Sirpa Rajalin.**

Drunk driving has increased significantly during this year. There are over 800 suspected drunk driver cases more than last year within the same timeframe. During the increased surveillance week in April, 40,000 drivers were stopped and tested for blood alcohol. Almost every hundredth driver was drunk.

The impact of intoxicants is highlighted in the more serious accidents. Last year, there were 255 motor vehicle accidents (resulting in death) under investigation. About one third of the cases featured a drunk driver. One third of the drunk drivers were repeat offenders.

Changes in the alcohol consumption are clearly visible in traffic safety. As the prices of alcohol were lowered in 2004, consumption increased 15 per cent from the previous year.

Bodily injuries caused by drunk drivers increased similarly. Last year brought no change to these figures.

Drunk drivers often have personal problems with regards to money matters, relationships, work and leisure activities. A growing share of the drunk drivers is formed by people who are addicted to intoxicants and can not follow the rules and regulations of society even if they wanted to.

The EU directive, which took effect around ten years ago, obligates officials to revoke the driving licenses of those driving under influence of alcohol (DUI). Various cooperation models have been employed to determine the state of drunk driver's intoxicant addiction and health in general.

The driver is directed to his/her own municipal healthcare physician, to alcohol clinic or private healthcare provider. Within an agreed-upon monitoring period there is an assessment, whether the driver can survive without intoxicants and thus avoid DUI repeat offence.

According to a recent study, however, the medical monitoring of the driver has no effect on whether the driver will repeat the offence or not. Expert doctors are of the opinion that the resources of healthcare should not be directed to these activities as they are deemed to be useless. The doctors propose that the police should start to check up on how the temporary driving bans are being obeyed and – in repeat offender cases – the justice system would revoke the driving license indefinitely or definitely.

Drunk driving is especially fatal for young and inexperienced drivers who have not developed a proper driving routine. Out of all traffic accidents resulting in death, about 40 per cent of the drivers are under the age of 24.

For many young people who are in the process of separating from home, the world of the adults is viewed to be an alien place and the norms of the society do not seem to apply to these youth. The young may adapt their own norms, and one such norm may be driving while under influence of alcohol.

In surveys, one third of the youth have stated that they have been in a car which was driven by a drunk person. About ten per cent of Finnish high school students and twenty per cent of vocational school students admit to having driven drunk themselves at one time or another.

One seeks to curtail drunk driving by, among other things, using alcohol locks, which were introduced a couple of years ago for testing purposes. Drivers who are not intoxicant addicts and who have received a suspended DUI sentence can get such a device installed to their car if they so desire.

The alcohol lock is being utilised effectively, however, only as it becomes standard equipment in all cars. In the general traffic safety plan the target has been set – similarly to Sweden – to have mandatory alcohol locks in new lorries and buses in 2010 and in all new private cars and vans by 2012.

Drunk driving should be prevented also by lowering the current illegal blood alcohol limit from 0.5 per mille to 0.2 per mille. The lowered blood alcohol limit should take effect immediately with regards to holders of temporary licenses and professional drivers.

The tightening of allowed blood alcohol level would decrease especially the accidents of new drivers. Drunk driving could be decreased also by making it illegal to consume alcohol in private cars or vans.

The transition to 0.2 per mille limit for all drivers should be made only as the police has enough monitoring devices at its disposal. At the same time, punishment should be linked to the per mille level. In Sweden and Norway the tightening of per mille threshold has been assessed to have a sobering effect on traffic.

The lower blood alcohol level can be justified also with the increases in the mixed use of alcohol, narcotics and medical drugs. Already a small amount of alcohol, linked with other intoxicants, increases the risk of an accident significantly.

The current "legal" 0.5 per mille threshold gives the people a distorted image about traffic. The aim of road traffic legislation is total sobriety.

The risk of getting caught decreases drunk driving significantly. Monitoring has been enhanced by taking into consideration at what times and where the drunk drivers usually drive. Alcohol stop checks in traffic should be conducted also during rush hour, so that all the passers-by get the feeling that surveillance is comprehensive.

In traffic, drunk drivers are feared now more than previously and they are reported, by mobile phones, to the police more often. The studies conducted last year show that the majority of citizens supports the lowering of per mille threshold and accepts that alcohol locks gradually become mandatory for all new automobiles.

In addition, the punishment for drunk driving should be more severe in order to achieve pre-emptive effects. The sentences for serial offenders should be heavier and the confiscation of the driver's car should be linked to the punishment more often than is the case now.

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Liikenneturva suggested, in vain, activities for the new Government Agenda in order to prevent drunk driving. The only proposal in the agenda which has any effect on DUI is the slight increase of the alcohol tax. Hopefully the decreasing of the road traffic intoxicant problem will be included in the traffic policy report that the Government will present to the Parliament in due time.

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