

ROSE[®] REPORT

Reinsurance Outcomes and Service Experts

Driving and Sleep Disorders

It is easy to focus on the dangers of driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol because we have tests to measure this. But to what do you attribute the loss of individuals in crashes due to sleepiness? Every year approximately 100,000 police-reported crashes occur annually involve drowsiness or fatigue as a principal factor in the crash. It is estimated that 1,000,000 crashes occur each year from driver inattention. Approximately 1500 people are killed, and over 70,000 are injured in fall-sleep crashes annually.¹

In the past week, we shared in the loss of Herb Brooks, University of Minnesota, and USA Olympic Hockey Coach and gold medal winner in 1980. It is believed Mr. Brooks died tragically as a result of falling asleep at the wheel of his vehicle in a one-car accident on August 11, 2003.

ROSE Seminar presentation

Dr. Mark Mahowald of the Minnesota Regional Sleep Disorders Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota provided information at the Nineteenth Annual ROSE Seminar this year on “Sleepiness in the Workplace”. Dr. Mahowald states that each person requires a specific number of hours of sleep. Any reduction below this amount accumulates as a sleep debt. The sleep debt does not dissipate over time – it is relentlessly cumulative. As a result, any degree of sleepiness, whether due to volitional sleep deprivation or to an underlying sleep disorder will result in impaired performance – in the workplace, classroom or behind the wheel.

Who is at risk?

Everyone is at risk if you fit one of these criteriaⁱⁱ:

- Sleep-deprived or fatigued
- Driving long distances without rest breaks
- Driving through the night, the early afternoon, or at other times when you are normally asleep
- Taking medications that increase sleepiness or drinking alcohol
- Driving alone
- Driving on long, rural, boring roads
- Frequent travelers
- Shift workers
- Commercial drivers
- Undiagnosed sleep disorders
- Young people

Prevention

- Get a good night's sleep. Recognize what your body dictates as adequate sleep – it differs for all of us.
- If working shift work – provide sufficient recovery between shifts, manipulation of light (bright light during the night shift/shielding from light in morning), naps when able, medications, avoid excessive overtime, etc.
- If going on a long trip – bring a passenger, make regular stops every 100 miles or 2 hours, pull off the road for brief naps, etc.
- Seek medical consultation if you believe you have a sleep disorder
- Attend education and injury prevention programs
- Creation of “rumble strips” on shoulders of highways
- LOOK for the warning signs on yourself or a fellow driver such as: drifting from the lane of traffic, wandering/disconnected thoughts, yawning repeatedly, missed traffic signs, difficulty focusing or keeping eyes open

Litigation

Although a police officer may not arrest you for “being sleepy”, as what might happen if you are intoxicated, the end results are becoming similar. The state of New Jersey instituted “Maggie’s Law” in June 2003, stating it is illegal to drive in New Jersey if you have been awake for more than 24 hours. Likewise, court rulings are looking at these crashes in a similar fashion as they have drunk drivers, and instituting severe penalties for fatalities (15+ year sentences). In addition, public policies are being issued in several areas:

- Health and safety research - NIH, and CDC
- Transportation – hours of service, education, screening
- Healthcare workers – hours and errors
- Hazardous work – nuclear power plants
- Education – school start times/learning abilities

Management

Sleep is not like money – you cannot save it up to spend it at a later time; but you can go in debt. Sleep and fatigue have major implications in health, safety, productivity, financial, and above all – life and death situations. There are effective treatments available for sleep disorders and measures to take to counteract problems with alertness and fatigue. There is no shortage of tragic stories related to a single moment of inattention at the wheel. Additional research is needed on measures that increase or restore driver alertness or reduce crash risk or incidenceⁱⁱⁱ. Until that time, be alert to your own approaches to driving knowledge, attitudes and behaviors – and get a good night’s sleep.

ⁱ www.sleepfoundation.org/activities/daaafacts.html

ⁱⁱ www.sleepfoundation.org/activities/daaafacts.html

ⁱⁱⁱ National Center on Sleep Disorders Research, “Drowsy Driving and Automobile Crashes”, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration – Expert Panel: Strohl, MD, Kingman P.; Blatt, Ph.D., Jesse; Council, Ph.D., Forrest; Georges, Kate; Kiley, Ph.D., James; Kurrus, Roger; McCartt, Ph.D., Anne T.; Merritt, Ed.D., RN, Sharon L; Pack, Ph.D., MD, Allan I.; Rogus, RN, MS, Susan; Roth, Ph.D., Thomas; Stutts, Ph.D., Jane; Waller, Ph.D., Pat; Willis, David.