

Too often, road safety is treated as a transportation issue, not a public health issue, and road traffic injuries are called “accidents,” though most could be prevented. As a result, many countries put far less effort into understanding and preventing road traffic injuries than they do into understanding and preventing diseases that do less harm.

Every day as many as 140 000 people are injured on the world's roads. More than 3000 die and some 15 000 are disabled for life. Each of those people has a network of family, friends, neighbours, colleagues or classmates who are also affected, emotionally and otherwise. Families struggle with poverty when they lose a breadwinner or have the added expense of caring for disabled family members.

Current figures are alarming enough. Even more alarming are trends. If they continue, by 2020, the numbers of people killed and disabled every day on the world's roads will have grown by more than 60%, making road traffic injuries a leading contributor to the global burden of disease and injury. This burden falls most heavily on low-income and middle-income countries. Today, they account for 90% of the deaths and disabilities resulting from road traffic injuries. Soon, that will rise to 95%.

World Health Day 2004 will provide an opportunity to focus the world's attention on this very critical and rapidly growing public health problem. We have chosen “*Road Safety Is No Accident*” as the slogan for the Day. It tells an important truth, one that gives reason for hope: road traffic injuries can be prevented, if they are recognized as a serious public health problem and if governments and others take the necessary actions to prevent them.

High-income countries were the first to motorize and the first to learn by experience that, while motorized travel can provide many benefits, it can also do harm unless safety is made a primary consideration. The countries most successful at reducing harm have engaged many different groups from government, civil society and industry in coordinated programmes of road safety research, development and implementation. Now, some of the most heavily motorized countries in the world have some of the lowest rates of road traffic death per 100 000 people, with annual rates below 6.0 and falling. By contrast, many other countries have rates in excess of 28.0 per 100 000 people.

We hope that you and your colleagues will join the World Health Organization in celebrating

World Health Day 2004. This brochure is meant to provide you with some general information about road traffic injuries and their prevention to help you think about ways in which you might use World Health Day to raise awareness and promote action to prevent such injuries in the months and years following. I am confident that, by taking action now and by working together, we can reverse the current trends and save millions of adults and children from death and disability between now and 2020, and many millions more people in the years beyond.

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