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Fatal Accidents Linked
Strongly To Alcoholics

Implied-Consent Laws Based On Myths
About Social Drinker, Psychiatrist Says

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Laws limiting the amount of alcohol a motorist can consume before he is considered intoxicated are "junk," a University of Michigan psychiatrist said here Wednesday.

These implied-consent laws affect the social drinker, but have little impact on chronic alcoholics—the drivers who may cause as many as half of all fatal car accidents, he said.

Dr. Melvin L. Selzer explained that implied-consent laws stem from the "elaborate myth" that social drinkers who have had "one too many" are responsible for most auto accidents.

Under the implied-consent law, a motorist must submit to a test to determine if he has been drinking. If the test shows that he has consumed alcohol beyond a certain limit, he faces drunk-driving charges.

Describes Link

Speaking at the Medical College of Ohio, Dr. Selzer described the link between fatal auto accidents and drivers who are chronic alcoholics.

Since the 1920s, everyone believed casual or social drinkers caused most serious and fatal traffic accidents, the Michigan psychiatrist said.

This myth was justified by the notions that alcoholics would be both too drunk to drive, and unlikely to expose their illness by driving while intoxicated and risking arrest.

Recent studies in Sweden, however, revealed that 1,000 of 2,000 arrested repeatedly for drunken driving were chronic alcoholics. Similar studies in Canada showed that alcoholics had 10 times as many convictions for drunken driving than other motorists.

Dr. Selzer's own three-year study of 96 Washtenaw County, Michigan, drivers who had caused fatal accidents found that more than one-third of them were chronic alcoholics.

"Interviews with their relatives showed that alcoholics do, indeed, drive when intoxicated," Dr. Selzer said.

He quoted the wife of one alcoholic driver as saying: "Why, he drove everywhere. He was just too drunk to walk."

Dr. Selzer said research at the U of M and elsewhere suggests that the estimated 8 million alcoholics in the U.S. "cause between 40 and 50 per cent of all fatal auto accidents."

But he opposes lowering the alcohol levels for legal intoxication implied-consent laws because it will not affect the alcoholic driver.

"If arrested under implied consent, the alcoholic is fined, loses his driving license for a while, but then is free to drive again without treatment for his disease, Dr. Selzer explained.

"I feel that alcoholism should be a reportable disease," Dr. Selzer said. "If a physician finds one of his patients is an alcoholic, he should be required to report it to the state department of motor vehicles so that the alcoholic's license is suspended."

Seeks Screening

All persons arrested for drunken driving should be screened for alcoholism, Dr. Selzer suggested. Alcoholics should then be required to undergo treatment before they are allowed to drive again.

He noted that 23 of the 36 alcoholic drivers in the U of M study had been arrested at least once for drunken driving or drunk-disorderly conduct prior to their fatal accident.

"Here were people with a public record of drunkenness," he declared. "Something could have been done to prevent them from driving to their death, but it wasn't."

Dr. Selzer also said that nearly 70 per cent of the 96 drivers in his study had at least one symptom of mental illness — a history of violence, paranoid thinking, depression, or suicidal pre-occupation.

Alcoholic Defined

An alcoholic is defined by the World Health Organization as a person whose excessive drinking is deleterious to some aspect of his life.

Dr. Selzer stressed that the drinking-driving problem is not caused by the social drinker — not the person who has been at a cocktail party.

The responsibility for many of the alcohol-involved accidents rests with the alcoholic. It is due as much to the alcoholic's underlying emotional illness as to impairment caused by heavy intoxication, he said.

Rehabilitation and methods to quarantine these drivers could reduce the total number of fatal auto accidents by one-third, he added.