

Road Rage

Road rage has already caused the death of one motorist and Cape Town has been incensed by another incident in which two young men were bludgeoned into life-threatening insensibility by a motorist who believed that they had wronged him. The media gave the case full front-page coverage, and appeals were made for witnesses to come forward to help identify the attacker. At the time of writing, the perpetrator has been identified, and is expected to give himself up to the police, and has stated in a call to a local radio station that the young men who were beaten were not as innocent as they seemed from the media reports.

A search of MEDLINE using the term 'road rage' produced some interesting items. An article titled 'Road rage: a psychiatric phenomenon?'¹ reported on attendees at general practice clinics that examines self-reported road rage and psychiatric morbidity. They found that perpetrators had increased aggression scores and psychiatric morbidity. There was a strong association with male sex and illicit drug use, and a strong negative association with driving experience. A weaker association was found with youth. Their conclusion: There is an association between road rage and psychiatric morbidity.

A paper originating in Oregon, USA, documents the 36-year history, with five examples, of fatal road rage in Marion County, Oregon. Alcohol intoxication was present in four of our five cases. Included are two deaths by gunshot at close range, two deaths as a result of a motor vehicle traffic accident, and one natural death. All subjects were males. The authors stress the need for further study of this phenomenon, especially through the use of the psychological-psychiatric autopsy.

What, if any, is the doctor's role in road rage? It could include recognising possible perpetrators, preventing these attacks, and providing information to the traffic authorities about the conditions leading to these incidents.

There are a number of obvious points:

- This type of behaviour is unacceptable in our society;
- There is a high level of aggression in motorists, which sometimes gets out of control;
- Motorists need to learn to curb aggressive tendencies and to drive in a responsible and courteous manner.

But perhaps an additional point could be to give advice to patients who, in the opinion of the doctor, could be a candidate for road rage. Such material is available:

Gary Smith, erstwhile editor of *Hypertension* and now a scientific and technical writer and editor, in his book *The Complete Guide to Driving Etiquette. Taking the rules of the Road a Step Further*³ provides many suggestions for curbing aggressive responses while driving and how drivers can extend common daily courtesy into motoring. These practical guidelines, if applied by all motorists, would lead to a meaningful decrease in incidents of road rage, and as a natural consequence, motor accidents. The book also has a section which 'profiles specific behaviour of the aggressive driver, what triggers such behaviour, and how to avoid these situations . . . using standard avoidance techniques to neutralise potentially volatile situations'.

Let's be truthful, we really need that here!

Motorists flout driving rules with nauseating regularity, while traffic authorities seem more intent on ticketing errant motorists for parking rather than moving offences. It is time that something is done, as the Arrive Alive campaign, about which we were all so hopeful, has proved to be somewhat of a failure. And it needs to be done before someone else gets killed in a road rage incident.

1. Fong G *et al Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol* 2001;36(6):277-86.
2. Batten PJ *et al J Forensic Sci* 2000 Mar;45(2):397-9.
3. Smith G. *The complete guide to driving etiquette. Taking the rules of the road a step further.* (ISBN 0-9658380-1-3) \$24-95 (Plus p+p) Chatgris Press, P O Box 15092, New Orleans, LA 70175-5092 (Order online from www.chatgrispress.com)