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## It's a crash, not an accident Ending a language of neglect and denial

RoadPeace, the national charity for road crash victims, is calling for policy makers and the media to stop using the word 'accident' when referring to road crashes, and to adopt an appropriate, constructive and accurate terminology such as crash or collision.

### **'Crash' does not presume innocence or guilt**

If no-one was at fault in a collision, this should be proved. 'Accident' suggests something unintentional, and most collisions certainly are not premeditated. But it also suggests something that was beyond control; it is, as one of our members has said, a description with an excuse embedded within it. The phrase "*it was just an accident*" serves both as a claim of innocence and as an exoneration. Use of the term 'accident' is inappropriate until all the facts of the case are known.

Alternative words like crash or collision do not presume guilt or culpability. They avoid any value judgement and can apply equally to collisions caused by animals running out on the road, a drink driver speeding, or a staged collision, the so called 'crash for cash'. Traffic police and collision investigators have been supportive of the need for appropriate terminology, as seen by the notice boards at crash sites that refer to collisions, not accidents. The ACPO Road Death Investigation Manual, first published in 2001, avoids the use of 'accident'.

### **'Crash' does not excuse law breaking and risk taking**

'Accident' is even less appropriate for an event which results in a conviction, especially those involving custodial sentences. Dangerous driving convictions require that the standard of driving was *far below* what would be expected of a competent and careful driver, such as the use of highly inappropriate speed, deliberate disregard of traffic lights or using a vehicle with a dangerous defect. In these circumstances, while collisions may not be intentional, calling them accidents is clearly inappropriate.

### **'Crash' does not contribute to the discrimination against road crash victims**

Those bereaved and injured in crashes do not have the same rights to information or support, as do other victims of crime, even when a driver is prosecuted. Someone injured by a drink driver does not have to be kept informed of the investigation nor do they qualify for the same support that is offered automatically to victims of burglary or street theft.

### **'Crash' does not aggravate the suffering of the bereaved**

Those who have been bereaved or severely injured by a reckless driver do not want to hear the incident being described in the same terms as a milk spillage. Many of our bereaved members take deep offence at road deaths being called 'accidents'.

### **'Crash' does not undermine prevention efforts**

Crashes have causes and contributory factors, accidents have excuses. Using 'accident' encourages a sense of fatalism, with fewer resources invested in prevention efforts as a result. It is this concern that explains much of the worldwide support for this change in terminology, as seen in the quotations overleaf.

**If you care, use crash.**

# It's a crash, not an accident

We have been calling for this change in the terminology for nearly two decades and we are not alone:

*Death and injury on the world's roads is arguably the single most neglected human development challenge. The vocabulary of the road traffic injury epidemic helps to explain the neglect. While child deaths from, say malaria, are viewed as avoidable tragedies that can be stopped through government action, road traffic deaths and injuries are widely perceived as 'accidents'—unpredictable events happening on a random basis to people who have the misfortune to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.*

**Dr Kevin Watkins, [The Missing Link: Road Traffic Injuries and the Millennium Development Goals, Commission for Global Road Safety](#)<sup>1</sup> (2011)**

*This guidance uses the term 'unintentional injuries' rather than 'accidents', since 'most injuries and their precipitating events are predictable and preventable'. The term 'accident' implies an unpredictable and therefore unavoidable event.*

**National Institute for Clinical Excellence, [Strategies to prevent unintentional injuries among children and young people aged under 15](#)<sup>2</sup> (2010)**

*We recognise the distress that can be caused to victims and their families when cases of bad driving are referred to as 'accidents'. We will not use this term. We will use the term 'collision' to refer to all bad driving cases that involve death or serious injury.*

**CPS, [Prosecuting Bad Drivers Policy](#)<sup>3</sup> (2007)**

*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.*

**Dr. Lee Jong-Wook, [WHO Director General on launching World Safe Roads Day](#)<sup>4</sup> (2004)**

*For many years safety officials and public health authorities have discouraged use of the word "accident" when it refers to injuries or the events that produce them. An accident is often understood to be unpredictable—a chance occurrence or an "act of God"—and therefore unavoidable. However, most injuries and their precipitating events are predictable and preventable. That is why the BMJ has decided to ban the word accident.*

**Ronald Davis and Barry Pless, [BMJ bans 'accidents'. Accidents are not unpredictable](#)<sup>5</sup> (2001)**

*The Oxford Dictionary defines an accident as an event that is without apparent cause or that is unexpected. Its use in the context of child road deaths could not be more inappropriate. More is known about when, where and why child pedestrian-motor vehicle collisions occur, and who will die as a result, than for almost any other disease in childhood. It would make more sense to talk of a case of accidental meningitis or accidental leukaemia.*

**Professor Ian Roberts, [The Energy Glut: Transport and the Politics of Fatness and Thinness](#)<sup>6</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> Annual TRIPP Lecture (2011)**

*The concept of 'accident' works against bringing all the appropriate resources to bear on the enormous problem of motor vehicle collisions. Continuous use of "accident" fosters the idea that the resulting injuries are an unavoidable part of life....Within the U.S. Department of Transportation's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (US DOT/NHTSA), the word "accident" will no longer be used in materials published and distributed by the agency. In addition, NHTSA is no longer using "accidents" in speeches or other public remarks, in communications with the news media, individuals or groups in the public or private sector.*

**[US National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#)<sup>7</sup> (1997)**

**RoadPeace has been campaigning since 1992 for the use of appropriate and neutral terminology. Our first Crash not Accident briefing was published in 1996. This briefing has been updated to mark the launch of the UN Decade of Action for Road Safety 2011-2020 on 11 May 2011.**

**With thanks to Network for Social Change for supporting RoadPeace's Justice Campaign**

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.makeroadssafe.org/publications/Documents/missing-link.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/live/13272/51621/51621.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.cps.gov.uk/publications/docs/pbd\\_policy\\_english.pdf](http://www.cps.gov.uk/publications/docs/pbd_policy_english.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [http://whqlibdoc.who.int/hq/2004/WHO\\_NMH\\_VIP\\_03.4.pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/hq/2004/WHO_NMH_VIP_03.4.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.bmj.com/content/322/7298/1320#alternate>

<sup>6</sup> <http://tripp.iitd.ernet.in/4thlecture%20ian%20roberts.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <http://azbikelaw.org/blog/was-that-an-accident-or-a-crash/>