

Alcohol, Emotions Blamed In Auto Fatalities

SAN FRANCISCO—Studies of drunk driving and fatal accidents should concentrate more on why the drivers are drunk and less on how drunk they are, a University of Michigan psychiatrist says.

Dr. Melvin L. Selzer reported a recent study of 96 fatal accidents in which 57 per cent of the drivers had been drinking, accounted for 117 persons being killed.

But, he told the American Medical Association recently, more than one-third of the 96 accidents were caused by true alcoholics, as opposed to "normal" drinkers.

The drivers in these accidents were compared to 96 other drivers, both groups in Washington County, Mich. Surviving family and friends were interviewed to collect data.

"Disturbing emotional and social factors are more likely to play a role in fatal accidents caused by drivers who are alcoholic than in those caused by nonalcoholic drivers," he pointed out.

"Emotional illnesses were amazingly concentrated in the alcoholic segment of the drivers causing accidents."

Of the fatal drivers, 41 per cent—mostly alcoholics—were emotionally ill and showed signs of paranoid thinking, depression, violence, and suicidal tendencies, he said.

Socio-economic class is also a factor in both alcoholism and in fatal accidents, Dr. Selzer noted. In this study, 76 per cent of the 96 fatal accident drivers were in the socio-economic class and only 5 per cent in the higher class.

Social stress was also a significant factor, with 53 per cent of the 96 drivers in fatal accidents having had a con-

flict with others in the previous 12 months and which was still disturbing them at the time of the accident.

More immediate personal crises were also a factor, the U-M psychiatrist found. Eleven of the alcoholic fatal drivers had had violent quarrels or fights within six hours of the fatal accident.

"Of these 11 fatal drivers, eight men had quarreled with women: their wives, girl friends, female drinking companions, and one with a barmaid. Two men had fought with other men and one man became

very upset because he could not have time off for hunting."

These factors could be related, he observed. "Although dealt with separately here, psychotherapy and social stress may well be related. A driver subject to severe depression or paranoid outbursts could hardly prevent this from affecting work performance or family relationships."

Selzer said the problem is to detect the alcoholic driver before he becomes a traffic statistic. Then, effective means must be found to keep him off the road.

Research to do so is now under way at the University of Michigan Highway Safety Research Institute, with which Dr. Selzer is working, under a contract with the National Highway Traffic Safety Bureau.

"Unfortunately, many traffic jurisdictions do not consider the possibility of a driver being alcoholic until he has two or more drunk-driving convictions. Previous research indicates that one such conviction is highly indicative of alcoholism," he said.

In spite of this, the alcoholic driver. Suspension or revoca-

tion of license does little good. "The chronic alcoholic is often not a solitary drinker and has a great need to drink with others, which in many areas means a car will be used to travel to a bar or tavern. Lack of licensure alone is unlikely to prevent such odysseys. Hence, it is not surprising that five of the fatal drivers were driving without valid licenses at the time they caused a fatal accident, Selzer stated.

He added: "Suspension or cancellation of licensure has long been criticized as an inadequate method for keeping

offenders off the road. Many drive in spite of such sanctions. "One appalling consequence of this study was that many states have no laws preventing the sale of a motor vehicle to an unlicensed driver. It would seem that elementary wisdom would require laws making it a crime to sell or loan a motor vehicle to anyone not holding a valid license," the psychiatrist observed.

"The presence of a large number of alcohol-addicted drivers in this group and in similar driver populations involved in fatal accidents suggests why the problem of the 'drinking driver' has not been resolved," he continued.

"The drinking driver who causes serious traffic accidents is frequently an alcoholic driver whose addiction immunizes him against the traffic slogans and legal threats. The problem of identifying the alcoholic who is a potential traffic menace is complicated by the fact that many alcoholics have ordinary traffic records."

"The alcoholic fatal drivers in this study often drove in an intoxicated state, a fact known by their families, their friends, and not infrequently by local police officers."

"In two cases, our interviewers were told by family members that the deceased alcoholic driver had often driven because he was 'too drunk to walk.'"

"Why were these drivers not stopped? Families are often fearful of calling the police because a high-speed pursuit may result, which increases the likelihood of a serious accident. (Two of the alcoholic fatal drivers were killed during such pursuits.) There is also the unpleasant possibility that no one cared very much—and that consciously or unconsciously the alcoholic's demise was not unwelcome. Given the hostility that the alcoholic's drunken behavior often engenders, particularly in family members, this possibility cannot be discounted," Selzer concluded.

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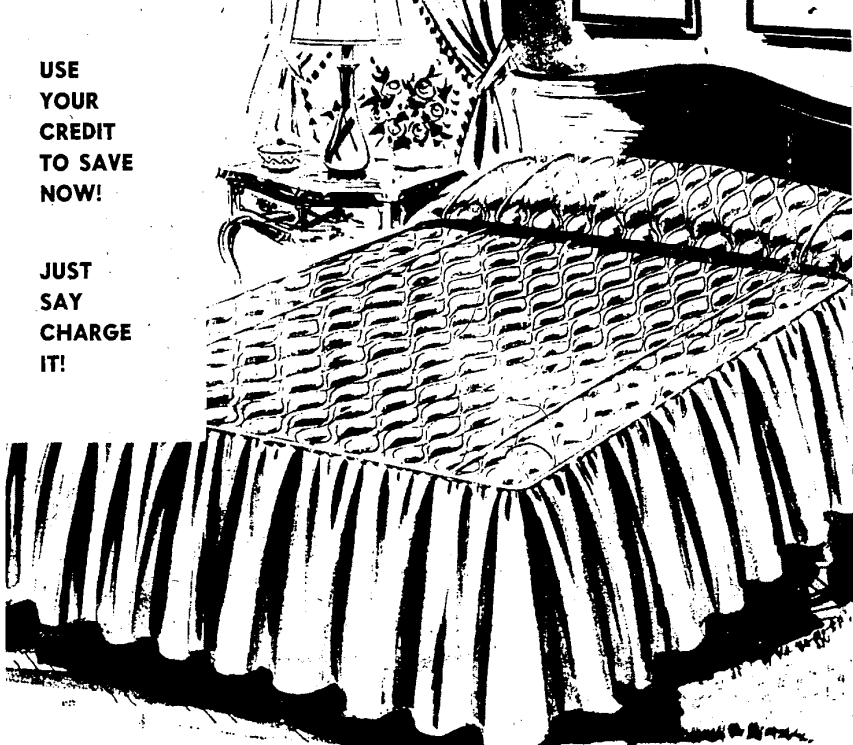
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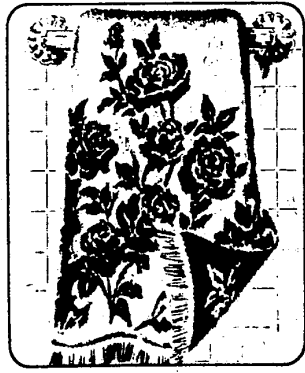
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