

Legal problems complicate drugged driver research

A researcher with the Highway Safety Research Institute at the University of Michigan points to legal and ethical restraints as a major stumbling block to learning the connection between drugs and automobile accidents. Kent B. Joselyn recently conducted a study which explores the knowns and unknowns of the effects of drugs on driving.

"No one knows precisely what the size and scope of the problem is," says Joselyn. "A great deal of research has been conducted on one drug—alcohol—and its effects on highway safety.

"But much less is known about the use and effects of other drugs—tranquilizers, stimulants, depressants, sedatives—all of the mind and body-altering substances widely used by the U.S. population."

JOSLYN SAYS The majority of legal constraints result from the body of laws dealing with the use of human subjects in research.

"This group of laws has its roots deep in the ethics of our society, and most of its applications are reasonable and proper. Nevertheless, although appropriate, the operation of the law does indeed limit inquiry," he says.

Joselyn cites research constraints relating to accidents in which there is

evidence for "drug abuse" where the driver was under the influence of a drug dosage much higher than would be recommended medically.

"Studies that would examine effects of such high dosage levels are usually prohibited because they constitute undue risk to the subjects," he says. "In such cases, researchers must rely on actual accident reports or experiments with animals."

Another legal problem is that the researcher cannot offer their subjects the kind of confidentiality provided in the work of doctors or clergymen.

"The researcher may be compelled to disclose information about the driver," says Joselyn. "Because drug-abusers face potential civil and criminal liability, they might be reluctant to offer reliable information."

OTHER NON-LEGAL problems complicate the research.

"There is no common definition of the term 'drug' and no adequate information on the extent to which various drugs are used," says Joselyn. Even the number of drugs used cannot be substantiated and range from 5,000 to 40,000.

He contends it is also difficult to measure the effect of a drug.

"The nature of the effect caused by a given dosage of a drug can vary within the same individual from time to time. Long-term use of the drug may produce tolerance or the user may simply become accustomed to

the drug effects and compensate for them."

Drug effects are often confused with drug presence, he believes. "It is possible to relate alcohol presence to impairment of driving behavior, but this is not so for every drug. Even if it were, accurate methods for detecting and quantifying amounts of drugs in the body are not widely available."

Another problem concerns the difficulty of establishing the extent to which certain doses of drugs, and combinations of drugs, impair driving performance.

"Testing systems that accurately replicate the driving task do not exist," he says. "Driving simulators do not provide a realistic testing environment, and even actual driving in dual-control vehicles is still an artificial situation."

Joselyn points out that drug-taking has become everyday behavior for wide segments of the U.S. population. "Sizeable segments of the driving population use a wide range of drugs that have the potential to impair driving behavior," he says.

Such drugs as anti-histamine cold preparations, caffeine, and marijuana are among the substances suspected of affecting driving ability.

"We are convinced that drugs do play a significant role in traffic crash causation," says Joselyn. "But we cannot state, on the basis of existing research that X percent of the crashes are caused by drugs."

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School income tax under consideration

State Supt. of Public Instruction John W. Porter has been authorized by the State Board of Education to seek introduction of a bill in the 1977 Michigan Legislature that would allow school districts to levy an income tax as an alternative to the property tax.

Under the proposed bill, local school boards would be empowered to levy an income tax without the vote of the people as an emergency provision if the school district's voters had defeated two millage proposals during the previous six months. The proposed income tax, when combined with existing property taxes, could be no higher than the previous year's property tax rate.

"Historically, Michigan school districts have submitted all revenue proposals—both operating and bond proposals—to a vote of the people," Porter said. "I think we have reached the point, however, where local school boards must be given flexibility to raise the revenue needed to provide minimum education programs for their students."

PORTER CONTENDED school financing will remain a crucial issue facing Michigan schools.

Porter, in a year-end report on the status of education in Michigan, said the state's school finance crisis has been building for several years. "It culminated in the fall of 1974

when Michigan voters removed the sales tax from food and drugs," he said. "That action has cost Michigan schools more than \$100 million a year ever since—and the lost funds have not been replaced by new revenue."

"The national recession also caused a further decline in state education revenues and many districts have experienced reduction in local revenues as a result of voter rejection of school mite proposals."

Porter said a decline of nearly 130,000 students during the last five years and projected decline of more than 200,000 during the next five years.

"Although enrollments in most districts have been declining, costs have been escalating because of inflation and sharp increases in the cost of all forms of energy used to heat and light school buildings and transport children to and from school," he said.

"These events have brought home to us the need for clear and definitive policies relative to the financing of public education in our state. Current policies seem to operate on a 'least or famine' basis that is too closely related to the economy of a state which, as we all know, is tied primarily to the automobile industry."

"Given such financial constraints, it is difficult for local boards of education to maintain existing levels of services for the children, youth and adults attending their schools."

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