Road accidents are the bane of modern civilization. With the invention of the motor vehicle and the increased human dependence on it for transportation, road accidents have become a routine occurrence in day-to-day life. Fatalities arising from road accidents are a common issue of concern and the focus of daily news. While all road accidents may not be fatal, many are responsible for serious injury, loss of limbs or other organs. Children are more vulnerable to road accidents than adults and make up a sizeable proportion of the victims. According to UNICEF, road traffic injuries are a leading killer of school-age children and adolescents globally, and affect developing countries in particular, who account for 90% of all the casualties on the world’s roads. Worldwide, it is the number one killer of young people aged 15-29; the leading cause of death for boys aged 5-14; and a top five killer of girls aged 5 and over [1].

AN AVOIDABLE CATASTROPHE

Road safety and associated matters are among the most neglected issues in underdeveloped and developing countries, which are challenged to manage several competing public concerns. Take the following scenarios, for example:

- A family of four is preparing to cross a busy street. As the family is about to cross, the youngest kid – a five-year-old – darts across all of a sudden, before the parents can even make a move to grab him. A passing scooterist knocks him down.

- An auto rickshaw with a kid and a parent is approaching the school gate. The child, who is excited to see his friends, suddenly jumps out of the vehicle and falls flat on his face. Fortunately, he suffers only minor bruises.

- A teenage cyclist is zipping down a road when a vehicle hits him, and he is severely injured. The people of the locality rescue him and rush him to a nearby hospital. Unfortunately, the duty doctor is not available, and the hospital also lacks a critical care unit. The boy later dies due to a delay in providing lifesaving treatment.

In each of the above scenarios, tragedy could have been avoided if only there was greater human preparedness. In the first instance, the simple act of one of the parents holding the hand of the child could have prevented the accident. In the second case, an aware parent could have seen through the impulsiveness of the child and averted the mishap. In the third example, the blame falls on the failure of the healthcare system to rise to the situation.

Around 60,000 children die due to road accidents in India every year, according to a study conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS) and US-based Underwriters Laboratories, citing figures from 2015 [2]. Losing a child to a road accident is among the worst fears of a parent. Unlike disease or disorder, traffic hazards are man-made and preventable. As stated earlier, casualties arising from road accidents can be greatly reduced with a better response from the healthcare fraternity. Hence, it is high time that we take a deeper interest in the subject and come up with pragmatic solutions.

INTERVENTIONS NEEDED

According to a recent study [3], road traffic injuries (RTIs) result in 1.35 million worldwide deaths, with 90% of them occurring in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Although, prevention remains the cornerstone of reducing RTI deaths, improved post-crash care is regarded as a critical intervention that can result in a 35% reduction in trauma mortality. If a complete trauma system were to be implemented in all LMICs with 100% coverage, over 200,000 lives per year would be saved, resulting in a 19% reduction in mortality from RTIs. The more realistic scenario of 50% coverage would result in over 100,000 lives per year saved, or an 8% reduction in mortality. Damage control resuscitation has the highest likelihood of saving lives at 50% coverage; followed by the availability and use of interventional radiology to control bleeding; tranexamic acid for patients with suspected bleeding; and pre-hospital tourniquet [3]. This study, however, covered the overall population and is not child-specific.
It is clear from the above that healthcare response should improve dramatically if we have to achieve better results on par with the developed world, where the casualty figures are significantly lower. Improvement in emergency and trauma care facilities is the need of the hour, and we have a long way to go in this sphere. IAP can take the lead in facilitating the transfer of advanced technologies and protocols from developed countries and modify them for Indian conditions.

On the other hand, prevention continues to be the most desirable goal. Hence, greater thrust should be placed on the prevention of road incidents through awareness and education programs. Such programs can be one of the focus areas for IAP branch units, which can collaborate with schools, traffic police, civic bodies and voluntary organizations to sensitize the public regarding day-to-day measures that can be implemented to enhance road safety.

The following are some of the preventive road safety measures that can be implemented:

- Hold the child’s hand while near vehicles or crossing the road. Talk to the child about why it is important to hold hands. Adult supervision is very important in teaching road safety.
- Explain what one is doing when crossing the road together. Involve the child in deciding when it is safe to cross the road. This will teach the child to think in the traffic environment.
- Always be a good role model for the child by wearing a seatbelt, obeying road rules, driving courteously and crossing roads safely.
- Involve children in choosing safe places to play. Separate play areas from driveways and prohibit street play.
- Teach children how to read traffic signals and road signs, about not running on the streets, always using footpaths and zebra crossings.
- Teach children how to cross roads using the ‘stop, look, listen and think’ process – stop at the kerb, look and listen for traffic, and then decide whether it is safe to cross.
- Make sure children wear bright clothing that can be easily seen by road users.
- Parents often rely on private auto rickshaws, maxi cabs and taxis, which are overloaded beyond their authorized capacity. Parents, schools, and traffic police should address safety issues relating to this.
- Teach children about safe car behavior – such as strapping seatbelts, not trying to open the car door while moving, not sticking one’s hand or head out of a moving vehicle; and always getting off from the safer side of the car.
- Teach safe cycling to kids. Get them used to wearing a helmet, knee guards and elbow guards. If they’re riding in the night, make sure they wear bright-colored shoes and clothing, not dark hues that put them at risk in the dark.
- Teach children not to cross near blind spots, such as crossing a road between vehicles or any other large object that could endanger them. Children should always cross from a clear area.
- Observe road safety day/week in schools, regularly communicate road safety issues to children.
- Encourage children to take part in interactive programs on road safety conducted by the traffic police department.

Yes, it is quite certain that we can do a lot to prevent road accidents involving children and to save lives in case of casualties. I appeal to IAP branches to launch sustained initiatives to propagate awareness through greater involvement with the community.

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REFERENCES