

Experts search for ways to make roads safer



There was a focus on children and young adults at February's road safety conference. [Photo: jeweledlion]

Although the world's attention is on the new disease COVID-19, old dangers have not disappeared. A big meeting in February discussed the problem of road accidents, reports ANNABELLE LIANG.

The coronavirus is worrying. It has resulted in more than 58,000 deaths to date. But, other dangers like road accidents continue to exist.

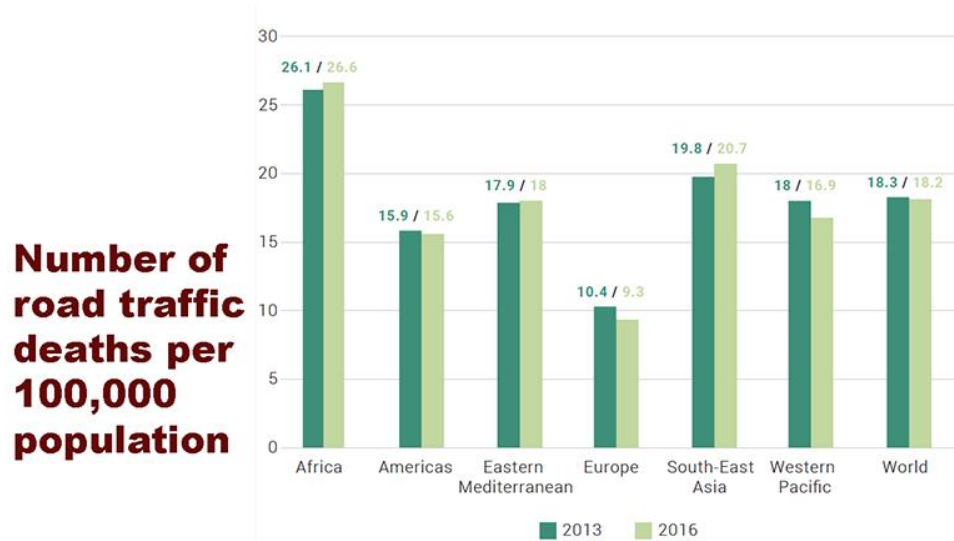
Around 1.35 million people die as a result of these accidents every year. Meanwhile, 20 to 50 million people are left seriously injured. This is why officials meet regularly to talk about this problem. In February, the 3rd Global Ministerial Conference on Road Safety was held in Stockholm, the capital of Sweden.

A total of 140 countries were represented at the conference. Attendees agreed to reduce road-related deaths by at least 50 per cent by 2030. They are also working towards having no road-related deaths or serious injuries by 2050. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organisation, called the lives lost every year an "outrage".

"It is an unacceptable price to pay for **mobility**. Most road traffic deaths and injuries can be prevented using tried and tested **strategies**," he said, in a speech during the conference.

Big challenge

Road safety is a big challenge for many countries, including Nepal. There are almost 2.4 million vehicles on Nepal’s roads. Most of them are motorcycles. In the past year, close to 2,800 people were killed on the roads. Road-related accidents don't even make the news unless it involves a celebrity.



A chart showing the number of people per 100,000 population killed in road traffic accidents in 2013 and 2016. [Graphic: WHO]

Basanta Kumar Nembang, Nepal’s Minister for Physical Infrastructure and Transport, is very concerned about the accidents. Many improvements must be made, he told the *Nepali Times*.

“There has been a big expansion of new roads, but unfortunately highway infrastructure and road discipline **enforcement** have not kept pace. We need to work on implementation day-by-day,” Mr Nembang said.

Puspa Raj Pant, a researcher at the University of West of England, said there are not enough pedestrian crossings, cycle lanes or traffic signals in Nepal. He thinks there needs to be more lights and crash barriers on winding roads.

“We have vaccines to fight killer diseases, but no medicines to reduce road fatalities,” Mr Pant said. “Education, improved infrastructure and safer vehicles hold the key to improving road safety.”



A safety fence known as the “Swedish 2+1 with wire rope median” in Sweden. [Photo: Joel Torsson]

New ideas

There was a focus on children and young adults at February's conference. After all, road accidents are the leading cause of death for those from the ages of 5 to 29.

A report, produced by the FIA Foundation and the Child Health Initiative, had some ideas for officials. It is titled “These Are Our Streets”. Saul Billingsley, executive director of the FIA Foundation, said that, traditionally, children were expected to be responsible for their own road safety. They were told to behave near roads, and asked not to run out in front of cars.

The report suggests changing the design of roads because children use it. There should be speed bumps and “school streets” that are closed to vehicles at certain times of the day. It is recommending that roads used by children should have speed limits of 30 kilometres per hour or less.

An app, Star Ratings for Schools (SR4S), was also launched with the report. It is developed by the International Road Assessment Programme, and will soon be tried out by more than 1,000 schools around the world. The app measures the risk of travelling from a child's home to school. This is based on road features and traffic conditions. The journey will then be given a rating of one to five stars. The app users will also receive recommendations and educational materials.

Making changes

Countries have taken steps to make their roads safer. Sweden has installed a safety fence known as the “Swedish 2+1 with wire rope median”. The special fence separates vehicles that are travelling in opposing directions. It is also being used by other countries, such as Spain, Ireland, New Zealand, and Australia.

Officials believe it will reduce the risk of death or serious injuries by at least 50 per cent. It also helps vehicles overtake safely on higher speed roads. “Since its first development in 2006, the innovation has been seen to achieve a remarkable reduction in severe crashes,” said Lina Konstantinopoulou, Secretary General of the European Road Assessment Programme.

VOCAB BUILDER

mobility (say “mo-bi-li-tee”; noun) = the ability to move.

strategies (say “stre-te-jees”; noun) = plans of action.

enforcement (say “en-fors-ment”; noun) = the process of making people obey a law.