

## ROADS TO SAFETY CONFERENCE

This Conference was held in London on 13–14 June and, surprisingly, was the first the Department of Transport has organized. It was opened by the Duke of Gloucester, who in his opening remarks warned delegates 'never to try anything (legislation) unless it has public approval'. This seemed to highlight two recurrent themes of the Conference: namely, that however compelling the evidence in favour of implementing road safety measures the public are unresponsive, and as a corollary legislation to force a response is likely to be unpopular.

Conference was divided into four working groups which ultimately reported back to a plenary session. I shall first report on the 'Alcohol and Road Accidents' group, which was chaired by Mr Frank Blennerhassett, and then summarize the recommendations of the other groups.

Four main issues came out of the alcohol study group:

- (i) Implementation of the 'Blennerhassett Report'
  - (ii) Estimating BAC by breath tests
  - (iii) High-risk drinking drivers
  - (iv) Epidemiological research
- (i) Mr Blennerhassett was covertly delighted, if overtly embarrassed, to find almost unanimous support for implementation of his report, which was published in 1976. The single most important effect would be to free the police from unrealistic procedural requirements in dealing with drunken drivers, and it was generally agreed that worries about giving the police unlimited discretion were poorly founded and now a non-issue.
- (ii) Mr Bloomfield (Permanent Secretary, DoE) described the two-tier system used in Northern Ireland: a driver whose BAC, on breath testing, is 80–125 mg per cent may plead guilty at the roadside, but if the BAC is 125 mg per cent or over he must go to the police station and will often have a medical examination. There is no provision in England for pleading guilty to a positive breath test. The Northern Ireland experience seems to have been favourable as regards improved enforcement and public acceptance, though Dr Davies (Police Surgeons' Association) gave examples of misleading breathalyser results, and Professor Kessel (Manchester) thought it unwise that highly intoxicated drivers should have the right to plead guilty at the roadside.
- (iii) The problem of the 'alcoholic' driver was not well resolved. Dr Clark (BMA) felt there may be circum-

stances where high-risk drivers should be certified; Professor Kessel, taking a more moderate line, argued against any solution which would merely overload existing medical services with 'reluctant patients', and pointed out that assessment of fitness to drive depends substantially on patients' self-report, and therefore declarations of sobriety intended to secure the return of a driving licence would more appropriately be made to a court than to a psychiatrist. Dr Hore (Withington Hospital) agreed that there was a need for special provision for alcoholic drivers, and wanted approved centres without legal obligations to be established.

(iv) Professor Fish (Scottish Alcohol Council) pressed for epidemiological research to discover the 'normal' pattern of drinking and driving, and the meeting resolved that a series of such studies would be useful; there was a reservation that this should only be done on a voluntary participation basis, which could therefore risk grossly underestimating the situation.

The main conclusions of the other working groups were:

- (a) *Education*: Road safety should be in the school syllabus and teacher training courses; parental responsibility should be encouraged; more careful planning of new developments, especially schools, is needed.
- (b) *Legal*: Wearing seat belts should be mandatory; simplified laws and only enforceable laws should go on the statute book; unrealistic speed limits should be raised.
- (c) *Engineering*: Inertia seat belts and wearing of them should be mandatory; introduction of fail-safe devices into motor cars; small road improvement schemes to match present-day knowledge and technology should be undertaken.

In conclusion the usefulness of the Conference was the bringing together of diverse disciplines; particularly impressive was the potential contribution of engineering to road safety. The Alcohol and Accident group I felt were over optimistic about the effects of implementing Blennerhassett which I would see as a fine tuning of existing laws. About half the alcohol-related traffic fatalities involve at least moderately dependent drinking drivers, and I am not convinced that the Conference was able to give the Secretary of State adequate advice on what special provisions need to be made for this group.

DUNCAN RAISTRICK