

Driving under the Influence of Alcohol

The problem of road accidents remains one of the main concerns of all the States in the European Union, in spite of all the effort that has been put in to their prevention.

This is a problem of international dimensions which has kept the States in a state of alert as far as the experiments and models that have been introduced and tested with varying degrees of success in other countries are concerned.

Way back in April 1926, a convention was signed in Paris which was aimed at bringing some uniformity to traffic regulations and circulation, in order to facilitate international tourism by adopting common road signs.

Nowadays, efforts are clearly being made at the Union level in an attempt to create points of convergence with respect to the road safety policies followed by the Member States.

Due to an obvious lack of time, we cannot present an in-depth comparative study of accidents, their causes and consequences.

We will, in this communication, analyse one of the factors that causes road accidents. This is still a very significant factor and it is one where, **in many cases, the perpetrators are not aware of the illegal nature of their actions.**

We are referring to driving under the influence of alcohol.

This is a crime. Indeed, there are many drivers in our country that **insist on this illegal behaviour and do not fully appreciate this.**

Nevertheless, in statistical terms, it is this behaviour that has led to the highest number of convictions (around 25%) handed down

by the different courts. These cases are also the quickest to be heard, because the legal procedures involved are not very complex.

A driver, whose blood alcohol level is above the limit, is caught in the act of committing an offence. The evidence is clear.

We ask ourselves, therefore, why this crime which hardly oscillates, involves a far higher percentage of men than women, and is transversal to all age bands, social strata and levels of schooling, is still being committed.

Are drivers not concerned about safety? Do they “bet” on the chance that they won’t be tested? Are they not afraid of being punished? Are the punishments too “lenient”? Does their egoism and excessive self-confidence not alert them to the social dimension of the act of driving?

And, all the time, there is more and more constant investment in awareness campaigns to draw attention to this problem.

In 2000 and 2001, Portugal started up the “STOP” program (as an experiment). This was the result of a partnership that involved the Ministry of Justice, through its General Directorate for Social Rehabilitation, and the Portuguese Road Prevention Association, and was aimed at drivers that had already been convicted of other crimes and whose sentences had been suspended, or in compliance with a court order as part of a provisional suspension of the case.

Based on the data available, which has now been expanded to cover all the country, it can be seen 37% of the people involved are repeat offenders and 63% are first timers. The most commonly occurring Blood Alcohol Level lies in the 1.2 to 2.00 range (62%). It can also be seen that driving under the influence of alcohol (DUI) occurs more often at night, at weekends and on public holidays. People with alcohol problems are an exception:

they are more likely to offend during the week and in the evenings.

The entire structure of the program aims to alter the behaviour surrounding alcohol consumption habits by those who intend to drive, as well as to encourage people to learn about and put into practice alternative strategies to driving under the influence of alcohol, in order to lower the risk of people harming themselves and others.

But, and how sad it is that there is a “but”, this program suffers from a minor/major drawback that needs to be overcome: there is no measurement of its effectiveness nor any analysis of whether the same type of crime is committed again after going through the programme.

We have, therefore, a programme which may be yielding large benefits, but which is not being assessed.

As we have reached this point, it is time to reflect on ways of making citizens aware of the need to behave in accordance with the law, but without repression, yet which do not affect the rules of socialisation, and of finding alternative strategies to driving under the influence of alcohol.

We have, however, had positive experiences of changes in behaviour. As examples, I would like to mention the case where a group of people take only one car, which is driven by one member of the party, called the “cool driver”, who doesn’t drink any alcohol and drives their colleagues around, or the case of resorting to public or hired transport, or even the new experiment introduced by Lisbon City Council which has started up a night bus service in the areas of the city where there is more night-time activity and which runs through to 5:00 am.

We have some way to go: along a path which other countries have, perhaps, already travelled!

By using and comparing all our experience, we can help change behaviour, save lives, and avoid major drama.

Maybe it will be enough just to pay attention to the words of one of our poets who wrote ...

“You know, Miguel? Yours was not a profitable death, one of those where afterwards they write tearful rhymes and rapid eulogies. You didn’t have friends like that. Just as well. You had yet to produce the (written and published) work that, until the end of the night, was a part of your life...

Your car was fast, it made Avenida Vinte e Quatro de Julho seem short and sordid. Especially at night In the silence of our hearts...

I will never know what you wanted to tell me... I didn’t wait for you to come back from the car with your notebook, and the last glass now seems to me like an incomplete farewell, a trail of grey that stains the bar where I rest, with sorrow.

This young writer’s journey to death ended on Avenida 24 de Julho, on a certain day, in a certain year. If only he hadn’t been driving...