One for the Road: Drunk Driving Since 1900

Barron H. Lerner, MD, PhD
Professor of Medicine and Public Health
Mailman School of Public Health
Columbia University

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Thank you!

• National Library of Medicine

• Greenwall Foundation

• Center for the History and Ethics of Public Health, Columbia University
Please join us for our weekly division conference, on Friday, September 23 at 8:00 am, in the Atchley-Loeb conference room, PH 8E-107. Dr. Barron Lerner, Angelica Berrie-Gold Foundation Associate Professor of Medicine, will present his just published book on the history of driving while under the influence of alcohol.
Anti-Drunk Driving Activism

RISE

• MADD founded 1980

By late 1980s…
• 300 chapters
• 600,000 members
• Drunk driving stigmatized
• Over 700 new laws passed
Anti-Drunk Driving Activism

PARTIAL FALL

• Conflicts at MADD
• Disagreements over data
• Role of industry
• Libertarianism
• Competing issues
Anti-Drunk Driving Activism

**QUESTIONS**

*How do we prioritize among worthy public health programs?*

*How do we best balance science with rhetoric?*

*When do we consider a public health problem “solved”?*
Drunk Driving pre-MADD

• Had occurred on trains

• But much more common with rise of automobile

• “Quarterly Journal of Inebriety” (1904):

“Inebriates and moderate drinkers are the most incapable of all persons to drive motor wagons.”
Prohibition (1919-1933)

*Rates of drunk driving probably decrease

*Legacy of Prohibition more important

*Alcoholism = disease

*Tolerance for alcohol use, even among drivers
BAC Testing Invented

• “Drunkometer”

• Rolla Harger, Indiana, 1930s

• Blow into balloon

• Solution changes colors

• Blood not needed
First BAC Levels Chosen

*AMA meeting, 1934
*Herman A. Heise, MD

BACs <0.05% (g/dL)

*Typewriting: “a measured loss of efficiency, generally gaining speed at the expense of accuracy.”

*Driving: “reaction times were somewhat increased and all subjects displayed a lack of appreciation of changes in judgment and motor control.”
First BAC Levels Chosen

>0.15%: under the influence of EtOH

0.05%-0.15%: possibly under influence

<0.05%: not under the influence
First BAC Levels Chosen

Norway, 1936, 0.05%  
Sweden, 1941, 0.08%
Suburbanization (post-1945)

* Enormous increase in driving

* Liquor (beer) available at restaurants, package stores, private parties

* Larger, faster cars

* Male “proving ground” (James Dean)
Result: Enormous Tolerance

* DWI convictions rare, even for recidivists
* Plea bargained away
* Seen as “accidents”
* “Wrong place at the wrong time”
* “There but for the grace of God”
Government Gets Involved

* Scientific studies begun
* Highway Safety Act (1966)
* 25,000 annual deaths
* 800,000 annual crashes

William Haddon, Jr.
Grass Roots Activism

*Journalist in upstate NY learns of two teen deaths (1978)

*Told by local D.A.:
“No, we don’t take away licenses or put people in jail.”

*Begins first anti-DD organization in USA

*Lobbies to change laws, publicizes issue through media
MADD Is Formed

*13 y/o Cari Lightner killed by drunk driver

*California, 1980

*Four prior DWIs, including two days earlier!

*Had served only two days total in jail

Candy Lightner
MADD Is Formed

*Candy Lightner:  
- Realtor  
- Not political  
- Angry

*“Lady, you’ll be lucky if he sees any time in jail at all, much less prison. That’s the way the system works.”

*Forms Mothers Against Drunk Drivers
MADD Is Formed

*Cindi Lamb hit by recidivist drunk driver in Maryland (1979)

*Infant daughter Laura paralyzed

*Becomes face of movement

*Lamb, Lightner unite
Activist Successes

* Lightner is relentless activist

* Wants laws tightened, loopholes closed

* Badgers Gov. Jerry Brown into forming commission

* Daughter’s story undeniably compelling
Activist Successes

*Lightner becomes media darling

*Appears on 60 Minutes, Today, Phil Donahue

*Emotional and "tough as nails"

*Made-for-TV movie

*MADD=America’s favorite charity
Activist Successes

* Over 700 new laws passed nationwide

* Enormous publicity (red ribbons)

* Drunk driving stigmatized

* Culminates in age 21 drinking law (1984)
Activist Successes

WALK like MADD
Let’s ELIMINATE Drunk Driving
FACTORS PROMOTING ACTIVISM

*Progressive social movements of the 1960s and 1970s

*Consumerism

*Feminism (M-ADD)
FACTORS PROMOTING ACTIVISM

* Conservatism of the 1980s

* Law and order approach to social problems

* Victims’ rights

* MADD promotes victims’ statements
1982: 26,172
2002: 17,419
FALL: BUREAUCRACY

* MADD as top-heavy charity?

* National versus local conflicts

* Charismatic leader eased out (1985)

* Gender issues
FALL: DATA AND PROOF

*25,000 figure questioned

*Are alcohol-related deaths always due to alcohol?

*Stricter laws and punishments do not work

*Does drunk driving deserve so much attention?

MADD
FALL: ROLE OF INDUSTRY

* Push for more aggressive, public health, approach

* Increased taxes

* Warning labels

* Advertising restrictions

* Threats to alcohol sales

C. Everett Koop
Argument: Alcohol industry uses imagery of cars and women to equate alcohol use with partying and the “good life.” This promotes a mindset that encourages drunk driving, especially among young men.

HARD TO PROVE
FALL: ROLE OF INDUSTRY

*Industry rejects more progressive approach

*Promotes “Responsible Drinking”

*Promotes Designated Drivers

*“Friends Don’t Let Friends Drive Drunk”

*Forges ties with MADD

*Some believe MADD gets co-opted
FALL: LIBERTARIAN BACKLASH

* Critics charge activists are not just against drunk driving but drinking

* Termed “neoproshibitionists”

* Social drinkers being persecuted

* Seen as evidence of “nanny state” violating civil liberties
FALL: LIBERTARIAN BACKLASH

*Modern Drunkard magazine

*Slogan: “standing up for your right to get falling down drunk.”

*Activists not really prohibitionist but perception remains so
FALL: LIBERTARIAN BACKLASH

Wisconsin:

- No felony DUI until 5th arrest
- DUI checkpoints illegal
- Children may drink in bars
FALL: LIBERTARIAN BACKLASH

*Enormous anger rivaling original anger of MADD mothers

*Mostly young men

*Candy Lightner ridiculed on youtube
Alcohol-impaired driving fatalities have declined 32% from 1991 to 2009.

Source: NHTSA/FARS
FALL: COMPETING ISSUES

*During and after 1980s, many other worthy public health issues

*Limited pot of funding

*Public chooses among causes

*Very political process
FALL: COMPETING ISSUES

*Some issues compete directly

*Drunk driving is a form of distracted driving

*But is it useful to call it that?

*What about “traffic safety?”
Anti-Drunk Driving Activism

QUESTIONS

How do we prioritize among worthy public health programs?

• Acknowledge trendiness of issues
• But don’t simply rely on who yells loudest
• Aim for best science possible
• Allow for moral outrage (?)
• Encourage advocacy groups to be dynamic
Anti-Drunk Driving Activism

QUESTIONS

What is the proper role of industry in advocacy work?

• Alcohol industry got involved early on

• “Responsible drinking”

• Lots of resources

• Sincere, but bottom line matters most

• May limit scope of activism
Anti-Drunk Driving Activism

QUESTIONS

When do we consider a public health problem “solved”?

*Like most campaigns, drunk driving a partial success

*Only a 40-50% reduction

*Public fully aware of problem

*Media has moved on

*Consider new approaches, especially technologies
  (interlock devices, infrared spectroscopy)