provided testing was sufficiently rigorous and thorough. Now, as the climate of opinion has changed and the public has come to understand that effective medicines carry some (albeit small) risk, the drug regulatory agencies have a chance to loosen the screws and positively to facilitate the development of new drugs. Whether or not they do so will depend partly on the beliefs of the political directors of those agencies and partly on the attitudes of their scientific advisers and full-time staff.

So long as some of the individuals in control of national drug-testing policies continue to adopt anti-industry postures there will be little chance of worthwhile reforms. For a generation or more the populist stance has been to attack the pharmaceutical industry as inherently piratical: the public has been told repeatedly that drug companies will—unless restrained—make outrageous profits out of medicines of dubious efficacy and safety.

Contemporary Themes

Promoting the use of seat belts

WESSEX POSITIVE HEALTH TEAM

Summary and conclusions

A six-month study into the effect of a substantial programme of integrated health education promoting the use of seat belts showed no major change in the rates for occupants of front seats, which remained around 35%. Though there were increases of up to 5% in the rates for wearing seat belts immediately after the multimedia campaigns which achieved high penetration, only those among women drivers were sustained. Of the methods used to disseminate information, television had the greatest impact on the community, followed by press reports and radio broadcasts. It is concluded that health education alone is insufficient to increase significantly the use of car seat belts. Britain should follow its European partners and pass legislation requiring front seat occupants to wear belts. As the recent experience in Australia shows, the benefits will be considerable in terms of reducing mortality, morbidity, and consequent expenditure.

Introduction

In 1978 data from the Department of Transport indicated that 2403 fatal casualties occurred among front seat occupants of cars and light vans; 69% were known not to have been wearing a seat belt. Studies carried out in Britain and abroad have confirmed the efficacy of seat belts in reducing death and injury in vehicle collisions. After the introduction of legislation in Australia which required occupants of front seats to wear seat belts, fatalities were reduced by 40% and serious injury casualties by 20%. In other countries reductions in serious injury varying from 20% to 65% have occurred simultaneously with seat belt legislation. If 85% of front seat occupants in Britain wore seat belts fatal and serious injury casualties could be reduced by 10 000 a year and the health service would save about £4m a year. The country as a whole would avoid wasting up to £100m a year on such things as productive days lost, social security payments, etc.

Despite this evidence, successive British governments have failed to introduce legislation to enforce the wearing of seat belts, even though it has been mandatory since 1967 for all new cars to have seat belts fitted for front seat occupants. Four attempts have been made to introduce legislation through Private Member's Bills, but all have failed. The present Government's statements relating to seat belts indicate that it still considers that education can raise the rate for wearing seat belts and that this is preferable to legislation. The Department of Transport is to spend £1m on further educational programmes and yet no controlled study has been performed in Britain to assess whether "seat belt wearing rates can be significantly raised by education." As a result of its concern for the prevention of death and injury from road accidents, Wessex Regional Health Authority mounted a research project to test this hypothesis.

Method

The study was carried out between November 1979 and March 1980 in two local authority districts, Winchester and Salisbury, with similar demographic features. Winchester was designated the "target" population and received educational programmes promoting the use of seat belts. Salisbury acted as the "control" population whereby any unrelated fluctuations in the rate of wearing seat belts could be monitored.

Measurement of this rate in the two towns was based on observation of front seat occupants of cars and light vans entering two matched
car parks in the two cities. Sampling was carried out according to a predetermined schedule, and a base-line measurement was obtained over a period of one month. Subsequently, measurements were taken for about nine weeks after each of two educational programmes promoting the use of seat belts. The first campaign was carried out in November 1979 for a two-week period, and a reinforcement campaign was launched in February 1980 for one week. The content of the programmes in Winchester were similar on both occasions and concerned the effect that the wearing of seat belts would have in reducing mortality and morbidity from road accidents in Hampshire and therefore Health Service costs, and in promoting better use of valuable hospital resources.

The campaigns took the form of:

Pusters—These were displayed in shops, offices, and health authority premises.

Television—Both the BBC and Southern Television gave peak viewing time to a discussion of the project and to specific features on the effectiveness of seat belts. Overall, 13 minutes of television time was given during the two campaigns, nine minutes being devoted to the first campaign. During the second campaign it was possible to use the results from the first campaign to urge people to think again.

Radio—The local BBC radio programme (Radio Solent) provided repeats of 20 minutes of “air-time.” This included a “phone-in” programme when two members of the project team were able to discuss with listeners the issues raised. During the first campaign the local radio station continued to provide regular reminders urging the public to wear their seat belts.

Book-marks—Twenty thousand specially produced book-marks appealing to motorists to wear seat belts were distributed in Winchester and surrounding areas. Most were distributed to motorists as they left the two car parks and, in addition, the public library distributed over 3000 book-marks to visitors. Newspaper articles were produced and distributed daily and weekly local newspapers serving the Winchester local authority district. These combined messages from other bodies supporting the campaign—for example, the police, council road safety officers, community health councils, and health authorities. On virtually every day of the campaign, one or more newspapers referred to the project or to the seat belt issue.

Thanks to the warm co-operation and support of the media, the two educational programmes received almost saturation coverage free of charge. If the air-time on television and radio and the newspaper space could have been purchased for a commercial promotion they would have cost about £50 000. To determine the level of penetration of the campaign and attitudes towards it, a sample of 1% of the population of Winchester local authority district was drawn from the electoral roll. Of those invited to complete a postal questionnaire, 396 responded. Further details of the methodology are available.4

Results

The base-line rates for wearing seat belts for Winchester and Salisbury were similar to the national average. In Winchester the rate for men was 34%, and in Salisbury 31%, the national average being 32%. For women in Winchester and Salisbury the rate was 37%, the national average 39%. Despite the substantial programmes of integrated health education, no significant changes occurred in the wearing rate in Winchester among front seat occupants. Women drivers showed a sustained increase of 3%, from 37% to 40%. Men drivers had an initial 2% rise but this returned to the base-line measurement. Overall, no other changes were sustained. In the control population, Salisbury, there were downward trends of 3-5% in the wearing rate for front seat occupants, but these changes were consistent with fluctuations observed in national data over a period of years.

Half of the respondents to the postal questionnaires admitted to being aware of the campaigns. Of these, 47%, had received information from television, 19% from the press, and 15% from the radio. The personalisation appeal through the book-marks had the lowest rating (9%). Despite the high penetration in (promotion terms) the information conveyed was insufficient to effect a change in behaviour. Of the random sample 32% considered that the messages used would have no effect at all in changing people’s attitude to the wearing of seat belts. Respondents were also asked what their main reason was for not wearing a seat belt. Apathy accounted for 23% of answers, 35% said that it was because they found seat belts uncomfortable or restrictive; but only 10% were averse to seat belts because of perceived dangers from wearing them.

Discussion

Despite the use of the best skills of persuasion available coupled with a substantial input of resources, it was not possible to raise significantly the use of car seat belts in a defined population. These results mirror a North American study5 which also showed that a limited but not sustained rise could be achieved using television. The Department of Transport’s “Clunk-Click” campaigns have also failed to maintain any substantial increase above the 33% level.

It is worrying that traditional common-sense health messages of the effectiveness of seat belts (in reducing death, serious injury, and consequential costs) were considered valueless by one-third of adult residents. Further research is required, but probably persuasive methods in addition to education are required to change the behaviour of this group. The large apathetic group are also unlikely to be susceptible to voluntary persuasion.

The forms that the prevention of road accidents should take are complex and varied. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that seat belt legislation will have a major impact on reducing death and injury in vehicle collisions. How long must Britain continue to endure 20 deaths a day on the roads before an alternative method, if any, is found which preserves the illusory right of the individual? No other country has succeeded and yet many have perfectly acceptable seat belt laws. Surely preoccupation with the few notes that will be lost as a result of legislation is tragically absurd compared with the misery that will be avoided.

We acknowledge the help of all those who made this study possible, including the chief constables of Winchester and Salisbury and the staff of their car parks, Hampshire County Constabulary, Hampshire County Council Road Safety Officer, the Winchester and Central Hampshire Health Education Department and Community Health Council, and the local media for their vital and enthusiastic support.

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