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True price of drink driving: Unnecessary deaths and heartbreak, say docs who have tried to save victims

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After his patient lost his battle to survive horrific injuries on the operating table, trauma surgeon Raj Menon felt a sense of sadness wash over him.

The man, who was in his 40s, was rushed to the National University Hospital late at night with significant injuries to his limbs and abdomen in 2020.

The motorcyclist was riding home when he was struck by a car. The driver was intoxicated.

Adjunct Assistant Professor Menon and his team tried their best to save him, but the man was bleeding profusely.

"I remember speaking to the motorcyclist's family and seeing the shock they experienced when they heard the news. At that point, it hit me that drink-driving fatalities are such unnecessary deaths. All that is required to prevent (them) is just a little bit of compassion for other road users, because the impact on victims can be very traumatic."

The festive periods can be especially busy for trauma units, with more drink-driving cases.

At the launch of the Traffic Police's annual Anti-Drink Drive Campaign on Nov 21, Senior Minister of State for Home Affairs Sim Ann noted that there were more accidents resulting in injuries, and also more arrests for drink driving, in 2025.

In the first eight months of 2025, 1,173 people were arrested for drink driving, up from 1,130 during the same period in 2024. And from January to June 2025, there were 3,740 traffic accidents which caused injuries, up from 3,437 during the same period in 2024.

Prof Menon, who heads the trauma centre at NUH, said the hospital has seen an increase in road accident victims from 2020 to 2024.

There were 211 patients from major vehicular accidents in 2020, and 320 such patients in 2024.

Most of the patients were motorcycle riders, cyclists and pedestrians, aged between 25 and 44.

The patients included an auxiliary police officer who was left in a vegetative state after a drunken driver rammed into him at Tuas Checkpoint in March 2023.

He was sent to NUH, where doctors from the trauma centre attended to him.

The driver, Yoong Kok Kai, had almost double the legal limit of alcohol in his system. He was also speeding.

Yoong was initially sentenced to 3½ years jail, but had his sentence upped to five years on Dec 5 after the prosecution appealed against the initial sentence.

Prof Menon said that with drink-driving accidents, he has seen a variety of serious injuries, and added: "The psychological distress these patients experience can also be quite significant."

Priscilla, 31, who did not want to give her full name, had to undergo 22 operations after she was flung out of her friend's car in April 2023.

Her friend had been drinking hard liquor before the accident.

Priscilla, who was treated at NUH, had multiple hand, limb and spine fractures. She also suffered a broken hip, and had road burns all over her body.

Her left leg was almost amputated due to infections.

After the accident, she would freeze whenever she saw a similar model of her friend's car. At night, nightmares about the accident kept her awake.

"I would wake up to a wet pillow because of how much I had cried," she told The Sunday Times during an interview on Dec 4.

Dr Jonathan Chan, who is an associate consultant at Singapore General Hospital's emergency department, said he feels a sense of frustration whenever he encounters drink-driving cases. He said they were all preventable.

One case in particular has stuck with him. It involved the victim of a drink-driving accident who had sustained serious head injuries.

Dr Chan said: "The patient was barely breathing, and barely had a heartbeat, and the entire team was involved in trying to syringe in blood to ensure enough circulating volume and to try all means to save the patient's life."

"I remember us being involved in this case for more than an hour, and it ended with us having to explain to the family members of the patient that although we had tried our best, it was not enough, and that the patient had already died."

Noting that there are more drink-driving accidents during the festive season, Prof Menon said motorists should be aware that the effects of alcohol are not just physical, such as the impairment of vision or slowing of reflexes.

"One of the earlier signs can be disinhibition, where people become less risk-averse," he said.

This could translate into risk-taking behaviour on the road, such as beating red lights, or overtaking other vehicles, which can lead to accidents.

"These perceptions could seep in with just a bit of alcohol influence,

even before the physical impediments set in."

This applies to both heavy and light drinkers, he said.

Dr Chan said: "The simple answer is - don't do it. Ignore that voice that says, 'I'm probably fine'. You might survive the crash, you might survive the injuries, but you will have to grapple with the consequences."

"I imagine it like ripples of water, affecting more than just the people involved in the incident. The destruction that lies in the wake of a (drunken driver) goes far beyond that of injury alone."

"There is so much more at play here when one chooses to drink drive."

He said that there is always a "profound sense of loss" when victims of drink driving succumb to their injuries.

"The moment the time of death is called, the entire room falls silent. The chaos stops."

"But this momentary stillness is then replaced by grief and heartbreak of the spouse, the parent or the child."

"This is the true price of drink driving."

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