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New eye test could test driver blood stream at roadside

The presence of drugs or alcohol in the blood stream and driver fatigue could be tested at the roadside using a new eye test, delegates at the National Road Safety conference in Dublin will be told today.

Mr John Dal Santo, chief executive of MCJ, said his company's Eyecheck system measures the speed at which the pupil dilates after being exposed to bright light, a process known as pupillometry. In his presentation Mr Dal Santo said the test, using a machine which resembles a pair of binoculars, can measure physiological impairment. The test takes about 60 seconds and uses a flash of light (for 100 milliseconds) to stimulate the pupil and then measures the response. The machine provides the tester with a numeric reading and a graph and also a simple 'pass, fail or maybe' reading.

According to Mr Dal Santo the device can be used as a sophisticated screening device, to determine if a motorist should have a blood or urine sample rather than as a stand alone test. Mr Dal Santo said the technology is currently used by prisons, drug rehab centres and industry in many countries, although it is not yet being used by police forces.

Government is 'incapable of action', NRA conference will hear

Former NRA head of road safety, Finbarr Crowley, will address the National Roads Authority conference today. **David Labanyi** reports

The Government is either unwilling or incapable of coping with the problem of deaths and injuries on Irish roads, a major conference on road safety in Dublin will be told today.

In advance of his address to delegates at the National Roads Authority (NRA) conference in Dublin, former head of road safety and research with the NRA Finbarr Crowley, said the responsibility of Government was to provide a legal system that can achieve the

purpose for which it is brought forward.

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Mr Crowley is one of a number of international road safety experts who will address the two-day NRA conference on the theme of an integrated approach to road safety. The Minister for Transport Martin Cullen will deliver the keynote speech this morning on the second day of the conference.

"Road legislation, including drink driving laws are not achieving that purpose and the whole thing needs to be thought out again. The problem with the body of Irish road legislation is that it only reaches a tiny proportion of drivers," Mr Crowley said

He said the promised introduction of random breath testing and the Road Safety Authority (RSA) - legislation for which is at the Committee stage in the Dáil - would not greatly alter the pattern of road deaths. "While I wish the RSA well, the fundamental problems will remain. The typical response to this issue is the Minister promises something, like more penalty points, to address the issue. But think about it. How will more penalty point offences improve the situation if the administrative system is unable to cope? The problems facing this area are endemic and in need of reform. There are basic flaws.

"The road safety record shows that the performance over the period of the last two road safety strategies has not been a success and a rethink is now necessary." Mr Crowley also said existing drink driving laws required a garda to spend an inordinate amount of time mounting a prosecution, half of which will fail for a variety of reasons. "The reason the conviction rate is so low is because the law has been subject to continual challenge for the last 35 years. In Ireland we have very severe penalties but a low likelihood of being caught.

In a recent pan-European survey it was found that only 4 per cent of Irish drivers had been breathalysed compared to 49 per cent in Sweden. "While there should be an expert analysis of why the law has failed, drink driving legislation should be examined with a view to simplifying its introduction. People ultimately respond to the likelihood of being caught." Mr Crowley added that there were a number of myths clouding the debate on road safety here including a belief that there was a lack of information on crash causation.

"On the contrary, we have a huge body of information. We have a huge body of traffic law, most of it not enforced or unenforceable. The question is, why is the Government unwilling or unable to give us a modern system?" he asked.

Mr Crowley said if the Government, had an "enlightened road safety policy would regard all traffic laws as designed to modify everyday traffic behaviour in the driving population."

This would be coupled with an enforcement process designed to simplify the application of the maximum number of checks rather than place penal sanctions on a small number of drivers. Instead, Mr Crowley said, the Government was responding to the rising death toll with more regulations, more draconian penalties and refusing safety agencies funding for new projects.

Mr Crowley said the result of the Government approach meant there is "effectively no integrated strategy" for road safety in the State. He described the current legal and enforcement system as "unfit for the purpose, reaching only a small minority of drivers."

There was criticism, too, of recent appeals from the Minister for Transport for individual drivers to take responsibility. Mr Crowley noted that "appeals to personal responsibility in Ireland take a long time - in excess of 50 years - to change behaviour and accident rates.

"It has taken us 30 years to get the seatbelt wearing rate up to 88 per cent. That is not acceptable. We could have got to that level in a much shorter time frame, if there had been a strategy to do so."

Also due to speak at the conference is Jan Moberg, from the Swedish Road Administration. Sweden is one of three European countries with the safest roads, along with Britain and Norway.

Speaking in advance of the conference he said that based on current crash rates, road collisions would be the third most common cause of injury in 2020, having been 9th in 1990, according to the World Health Organisation. Road crashes are the second biggest killer of young people aged between 5 and 29 years of age said Mr Moberg.

The new long-term goal was that no-one would be killed or seriously injured on Swedish roads, he said. Reaching that goal would require significant changes to Sweden's road system, including a greater role from the health sector. "Life and health cannot, in the long run, be traded against other benefits," he said. Mr Moberg said reaching this goal would require input from all sectors, including the government, motorists, engineers and car designers.

Pauline Leavy, the chief analyst at the Medical Bureau of Road Safety (MBRS), assessed the rising incidence of drug driving in Ireland, which was now found in 15.7 per cent of blood and urine samples tested by the bureau. She said an increasing number of motorists were driving under the influence of drugs although the number of convictions was small. The MBRS carried out analysis on 569 samples in 2004 and found evidence of drugs in 43 per cent of samples.