

Improving the response to road death and injury RoadPeace conference 7 April 2008



RoadPeace – past and future challenges

Brigitte Chaudhry MBE, Founder & President of RoadPeace

Today it is exactly 15 years since RoadPeace held their public launch – on World Health Day, which in 1993 was dedicated to the prevention of death and injury through violence and negligence, an issue very close to RoadPeace – the UK's first charity dedicated to representing road crash victims and providing assistance to them.

Within those 15 years, over 50,000 people have lost their lives on UK roads, and more than four and a half million were reported injured.

During all those years, RoadPeace has supported road crash victims and been their voice. Our charity campaigned throughout for an improved post crash response – a response fitting to the loss of life and quality of life and equal to society's and authorities' responses to other wrongful acts and traumatic events.

It is almost impossible now to recall the deep level of neglect of road victims at the time RoadPeace was founded, or the shocking absence of any systematic procedures by the agencies dealing with road death and injury. The article Hidden Victims, which is based on the experiences of victims and is included in the conference pack, is a reminder of the terrible plight of road victims at the time:

...I felt that our right as parents and our son's right for justice were nowhere to be found. We were supposed to disappear in the background and not to question anything and not to expect to be given any answers. The grief, loss and hurt will never go away, but we are made to feel that to point this out is an imposition...

...Not only are {relatives}faced with the horrendous fact of a loved one's – often their child's- death, but with an attitude to those deaths which borders on the obscene and which cannot possibly be acceptable in a civilised society.

It was therefore astonishing that until RoadPeace was set up, there was no charity in existence for this huge group of traumatised and suffering people, almost 100 years from the first death by a car and with millions of lives lost and blighted since then; that for so long road victims were left without assistance or help, having to struggle individually through procedures or to try obtaining justice. There were some specific campaigns, but not a special organisation – in a country that has a charity for virtually every problem. Even Victim Support, despite being government funded to help victims, excluded road crash victims from their support; only two local VS schemes accepted police referrals.

Looking back at the relentless struggle of the past 15/16 years – the hurdles, hard work, experiences of unfairness and frustration – by so many of us at RoadPeace and myself personally, it is no longer so very surprising that for such a long time no-one took up this onerous task.

Thus RoadPeace was very much a pioneering organisation, and the Mayor, about whose presence today we are very pleased, has known our charity from the start – as my MP at the time I founded it, while I was simultaneously struggling through 3 Judicial Review proceedings, for which he gave supportive media interviews.

Several of RoadPeace's other valued patrons, each representing different areas relevant to the post crash stage – criminal and civil law, public health and trauma – began working with RoadPeace and supporting us in our work early on. This included attending

ministerial meetings with us, speaking at our conferences, lectures and seminars, and on occasion preparing joint responses to relevant Government consultations, of which there were countless over the years.

At first it was difficult to know where to start with our work, or which challenges to take on first. The conference pack includes examples of RoadPeace's pioneering work and I will touch on some of these:

- Most important was the helpline, which was the first helpline for victims, preceding by several years the Victim Supportline, and by even longer some of the others that followed.
- Then were our surveys into road victims' needs: RoadPeace conducted from the outset a continuous survey of victims' experiences with the agencies they encountered, and of their expectations from each. The investigation by RoadPeace represented the only documentary evidence of its kind and was used by a Govt. working party (1992-1994) to draw up 80 recommendations for improved practices by agencies, one of which was to provide an information booklet for victims.
- RoadPeace was the first charity to produce such a booklet – our 'Guide through the aftermath of road death' in early 1995. RoadPeace now has separate Guides for specific areas, including on road death investigation - the first such Guide for victims.

In Spring 1993, RoadPeace became a member of the European Federation of Road Traffic Victims and later took part in a unique Europe-wide survey into the 'causes of the decline in quality of life and living standards suffered by road crash victims and families'. The most notable findings were the experiences of injustice by almost 100% of the UK respondents, greater than in any other country in Europe.

RoadPeace finds injustice towards road crash victims particularly abhorrent and would like to see the words of Martin Luther King serve as a warning, that 'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere'.

- We have campaigned for a law change almost from the very first day, backed up by a petition with fifty thousand signatures delivered to the Home Office and House of Commons. The failure of recognising the fact of death in legal charges and proceedings has been felt especially hurtful and unacceptable to victim families.

- In July 1998, RoadPeace launched a Campaign for Justice for Road Traffic Victims. The second 5-year term ends this summer, but many of our demands, spanning 6 key areas, will continue to need implementation or further improvements, and we will monitor this.

The presentations today will cover the recent development in four of the key areas; therefore I will only mention the last two:

■ **Medical care to national standards** – This is the present situation:

Road injury is not a priority for the Health sector and this has a direct effect on the funding of care. The Accidental Injury Task Force is only considering prevention and not post crash care. Two reports by the Royal College of Surgeons have acknowledged that consistent trauma care for the severely injured is not available: ***'high quality care for the severely injured is not available consistently across England, Wales and Northern Ireland...[with] concerns about the ability of the NHS to deal effectively with the current trauma workload and the consequences of a major incident'***

■ **Strategic approach by all relevant government departments**

There is still lack of joint working between all departments responsible for our issues, and of a fair approach to post crash assistance or organisations working for road victims.

- As part of our Justice Campaign, an All Party Parliamentary Group for Justice for Road Traffic Victims was set up, also in 1998 - a Group now supported by 150 MPs and Peers. Our next meeting in May is on 'Strict liability laws'.

- Also, for the first six years of that campaign, on each last Saturday of the month, without fail, RoadPeace held a vigil outside the House of Commons - to highlight the monthly road death and injury toll.

- RoadPeace introduced many more ways of highlighting the impact of road death and injury and of remembrance, designed to comfort victims and offer them much needed recognition, while also drawing wider attention to this ongoing disaster.

These are some examples:

- Internet memorials on the RoadPeace website
- Remember Me roadside memorials – 3000 plaques are placed nationwide
- Photographic exhibition – 'When Lives Collide' so far tour of 7 cities
- Planting trees at the RoadPeace Wood – within the National Memorial Arboretum
- Observing August as Road Victim Month, with special ceremonies each week
- Publishing victim testimonies
- World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims, started by RP in 1993

RoadPeace was instrumental in bringing this day into existence and has observed and promoted it for over a decade with their European sister organisations. As the result, the United Nations adopted it in October 2005 as **World Day of Remembrance** – as '*an appropriate acknowledgement for victims of road traffic crashes and their families*'. Following this, RoadPeace and FEVR, in collaboration with the World Health Organisation, produced a Handbook for observing World Day events, launched in 2007.

One of RoadPeace's three founding aims, next to support of victims and research, was the promotion of road danger reduction, which means that RoadPeace was also pioneering in this particular road safety approach, which seeks to address the source of road danger, not only the outcome.

- One of the key causes of road danger – speeding – was targeted by RoadPeace in 1995 with an anti-speed campaign and the production of 'Tough on Speed, tough on the causes of speed', the first anti-speeding publication at the time.

- And RoadPeace campaigned against the body count policy by Government, which demanded four fatal or serious injury crashes before allowing a speed camera; against red light violation, which despite being a very frequently committed offence, has never been the subject of an official campaign; and against the appalling act of hit and run.

- Last April, to mark the first Global Road Safety Week, RoadPeace and FEVR published the Briefing 'Black boxes for safer and greener travel' – recommending the use of black boxes to reduce road death and injury as well as carbon emissions.

- Other initiatives that deserve a mention are the Women for Worldwide Peace on the Road initiative and our long-term promotion of the use of correct terminology, as described in our Briefing 'Crash not Accident.' I will end here.

I know that we did not work in isolation; that many parties worked towards similar aims, and we look forward to hearing from key spokespeople in the course of today.

Together, we have ensured that the issues of road death, road injury and road victim treatment are firmly on the political agenda, from which - we feel sure - they can never again be removed.

RoadPeace undoubtedly played a key role in starting this process. The wrongful deaths and injuries of our loved ones and the way they have been treated have forced us into becoming experts in this area and campaigners for change, but today's anniversary hopefully marks the end of 15 years of struggle for recognition of road victims' rights.

What work lies ahead in future?

In the past years, once the way was paved, many new bodies and organisations for road crash victims have appeared, and new ones are coming into existence all the time. They do not all complement each other, but can even duplicate work or give different advice or messages, and this can be confusing for victims or even unhelpful.

And relevant Government departments and agencies have introduced provisions for victims and for post crash procedures, but these have yet to be applied consistently nationwide, at equal satisfactory standards.

So a clear role seems to be emerging for RoadPeace:

As the charity with the sole aim of representing the interests of road crash victims, and campaigning for their rights and justice for them, it will fall to RoadPeace to observe and monitor whether the promised provisions and procedures are applied equally and fairly nationwide, and at minimum quality standards in all areas, whether new services and laws will deliver what victims deserve and expect.

RoadPeace's long-time practical experience and the research qualifications of their Executive Director Amy Aeron-Thomas are excellent pre-requisites for such a role.

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- World Health Day (WHD) is the World Health Organisation's (WHO) anniversary day and is used each year as an opportunity to draw worldwide attention to a major global health challenge.

The theme for 7 April 1993 was: 'Handle life with care; prevent violence and negligence'

11 years later, on 7 April 2004, WHD was dedicated for the first time exclusively to the issue of road death and injury, which was given acknowledgement as a world health crisis needing urgent attention, with the slogan 'Road safety is no accident'

RoadPeace was involved in events on that day, through their international work as long-time members of the European Federation of Road Traffic Victims, FEVR. The Federation was invited to participate in the UN/WHO Road Safety Collaboration Forum, set up in the aftermath of the historic 7 April 2004, and has done so for the eight meetings held since then.

WHD today, on the 60th anniversary of the WHO (it was founded in 1948) is on the theme: Protect health from climate change – another passionate issue for RoadPeace.