

Speech by Minister for Transport, Tourism & Sport, Leo Varadkar for the Road Safety Authority Annual Academic Lecture 2012: *Medical Fitness to Drive* on Monday 8th October 2012

Introduction

At the start of Road Safety week, it gives me great pleasure to make the opening address at this year's RSA Annual Academic Lecture. I extend a warm welcome to all attendees and in particular our two guest speakers - Professor Richard Marottoli of Yale University School of Medicine and Professor Desmond O'Neill Director for the National Programme Office for Traffic Medicine. Today's lecture will focus on 'Medical Fitness to Drive' in an effort to generate awareness of the issue among the medical community, road safety stakeholders, general public and media.

With guest speakers of such expertise in the area of transportation and the older driver, I am confident that everyone will find today's conference both informative and useful.

We have made considerable advances in improving safety on our roads in recent years. 2011 witnessed the lowest recorded number of road fatalities on Irish roads, at 186, since records began back in 1959 and it was the sixth consecutive year that the level of road fatalities fell. The last four years, in particular, have seen the lowest levels since road fatalities were first recorded. To date in 2012, road deaths have continued to fall and are significantly below the number at the same time in 2011. As of the 5th October, 131 (to be updated) people have died on Irish roads, none fewer than in the same period in 2011.

Internationally we have recently moved to fifth position in terms of our road safety performance. Data published by the EU Commission in 2011 shows that, in taking that position, we moved ahead of Germany. However, for all of us involved in Road Safety, we should regard this not as an achievement, but rather as a challenge. We must now, collectively, do all in our power to ensure that the 2011 figure is not exceeded this year, next year or in any future year. So I ask you all to renew your efforts to stay safe on the roads.

Intoxicated Driving

Targeting road user behaviour through education, legislation and enforcement has been the cornerstone of our improved road safety record to date. The introduction last October of new low blood alcohol levels for drivers, including a new lower level for learner, novice and professional drivers has had a significant impact on driver behaviour in the area of intoxicated driving. Now more than ever it is recognised that drinking and driving is not acceptable.

The next step is to target drug driving. Whenever we talk about this subject, driving with illicit drugs comes immediately to mind, but the problem is bigger than just the use of illicit drugs by drivers. Prescription and over the counter medicines can also impair driving.

In addressing the area of drug driving we must also be conscious of maintaining the balance between a person continuing to take the medication as prescribed for them by their medical practitioners and knowing when it is safe to drive or whether they should drive at all.

It is important, of course, that people should continue to take the medicines prescribed for them. Their own wellbeing is very important. Clear medical advice, appropriate labelling and education are necessary to ensure that drivers who take prescribed and over the counter medicines become more aware of the risks associated with driving in such circumstances. All of these matters will be taken into account as we move towards enhanced roadside testing for drugs and, more importantly, any changes to the existing legislation on intoxicated driving.

Some months ago I asked the Medical Bureau of Road Safety recently to carry out research into the area of drug driving and roadside testing. The Bureau acknowledges the importance of taking medication under the supervision of a medical practitioner and the need to make the decision on when it is safe to drive. The Bureau is finalising the detail of its report and it will be made public very shortly. The report will make a number of recommendations, to which I will give serious consideration.

I understand from the Gardaí and all of the other experts in this area that the incidence of drug driving is increasing on a year on year basis and I want to move ahead as quickly as possible with implementing measures that will detect and deter drug driving. While the findings and recommendations of the MBRS report are being examined, I propose to proceed with providing the necessary legislation to allow for roadside impairment testing. This will involve the Gardaí carrying out a number of physical tests at the roadside, such as walking a straight line, and the drivers' responses and reactions will assist the Gardaí in deciding whether a driver should be required to undergo further tests at a Garda Station.

I intend to include these provisions in a Road Traffic Bill that is being drafted in my Department at present. The Bill will create a safer environment on our roads and, as well as impairment testing, will also provide for a number of other measures. Further elements of the graduated driver licence system will be introduced, expanding on those already provided. The Bill will also provide for the testing of drivers left unconscious as a result of a road collision and for adjustments in the penalty points system. In recent months my Department carried out a review of the penalty points system and, having now received a report on the matter from the Oireachtas Committee, I will decide on any appropriate adjustments in the levels for certain offences and will include these in the Bill.

On the subject of penalty points, last Friday I discussed with the relevant Ministers in Northern Ireland the desirability of moving ahead with a system of mutual recognition of points on both parts of the island. Officials have already met to discuss the matter and, while the issues involved are extremely complex, good progress has been made and will continue so that any difficulties can be identified and resolved.

Road Safety and Drivers' Health

While many factors contribute to road safety, a driver's health has to remain an important consideration. Driving is a complex task involving among other things perception, judgement and physical capability. A wide range of medical conditions, disabilities and treatments can impact negatively on a driver's crash risk. Medical standards for driver licensing are measured internationally to ensure that the driver's health status does not increase their risk of being involved in a collision and the purpose of this year's lecture is to review and discuss international best practice in an effort to develop similar standards in Ireland.

Our keynote speaker today, Professor Marottoli, will deliver a lecture on his research in this area. Professor O'Neill will then respond to Professor Marottoli's lecture with a presentation called 'Mobility and Traffic Safety – A Lifespan Approach'.

The lecture is being run in association with the new National Programme Office for Traffic Medicine which has been established by the RSA and the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland. Based in the RCPI, its remit is to develop medical fitness-to-drive guidelines and advise on public policy and communication strategies to promote an understanding of traffic medicine. The establishment of the new National Programme Office for Traffic Medicine and the work that is and will be undertaken by the new Office, addresses one of the Actions contained in the current Road Safety Strategy. This is the first opportunity I have had to acknowledge publicly the establishment of the new Office and I wish it and Professor O'Neill, who is heading the Office, every success with this work.

For a driver, understanding the impact of an injury or a disease or the way certain medicines might affect driving is a vital aspect of road safety. The key objective is to promote and prolong safe driving by supporting medical practitioners and drivers in making decisions about medical fitness to drive. The National Programme Office for Traffic Medicine, therefore, has an important role to play in raising awareness for both road users and medical professionals.

An early priority for the Office has been the creation of fitness to drive guidelines for medical professionals as well as the necessary training and support to enable the smooth and consistent implementation of the rules. Guidelines relating to car and motorcycle drivers are planned for issue before the end of the year. Work on guidelines in relation to trucks and buses has commenced.

As I mentioned the work of the National Programme Office for Traffic Medicine addresses Action number 45 of the Road Safety Strategy 2007 - 2012. That Strategy, which is now drawing to a close, was drawn up by the RSA and identified a number of actions to be completed by various stakeholder bodies in order to improve safety on our roads. The implementation of the actions has contributed significantly to the reduction in road fatalities in recent years.

In building on the successes achieved to date, I have asked the RSA to work closely with my Department in drafting the next Strategy, which will cover the period 2013 to 2020. In preparing the Strategy, the RSA is consulting widely with all relevant stakeholders and will submit the proposals to me in the coming weeks.

While it is too early to be precise about the priority issues, I expect that the new Strategy, without taking the focus off road fatalities, will concentrate to a greater degree on the causes of collisions and on reducing serious injuries. Fitness to drive will continue to play a significant role in those areas.

As I mentioned at the outset, this is the beginning of Road Safety Week and I call on all road users, including drivers, motorcyclists, cyclists and pedestrians to take time out during the week to examine your own behaviour on the roads and to consider what improvements you can make for yourself and other road users in making all of our journeys safer. Other activities that the RSA is sponsoring during the week include:

- Driving for Work Seminars to help business owners, managers and supervisors to understand how effective management of work-related road risks can benefit the bottom line;
- A focus on tyre safety, in conjunction with the Irish Tyre Industry Association; and,
- A road safety awareness day for younger children who will practice basic road safety messages.

All of these initiatives, however small, help in changing our culture and our attitude by keeping road safety high in our consciousness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to thank the organisers of this important academic lecture for inviting me to give the opening address and I hope you all have an informative and constructive day.