Lessons Learned from a Fatal Accident

Sleep-Depriving College Activities May Lead to Deadly Consequences, Safety Officials Warn

Severely sleep-deprived college students are literally taking their lives and the lives of others in theirs hands when they drive, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) warned after it investigated a highway accident in which four Yale University students died.

The NTSB urged colleges and campus organizations to develop and implement activity-scheduling policies that eliminate or reduce the operation of motor vehicles by fatigued drivers.

"Driving a vehicle when you are fatigued is as dangerous as driving while impaired by alcohol or drugs," said NTSB Acting Chairman Mark V. Rosenker. "We need to do a better job of alerting college students not to drive vehicles when they are sleep deprived. This tragic accident provides a stark reminder of the need to be alert to weather and road conditions and to be well rested when we get behind the wheel. Until we heed this harsh lesson we will continue to suffer the needless loss of young lives."

These warnings come after the NTSB recently issued a report on its investigation into a multivehicle accident that began shortly before 5 a.m. on January 17, 2003, on Interstate 95 near Fairfield, Connecticut. A northbound tractor flatbed semitrailer slid out of control on a turn, overrode the median barrier, and collided with two southbound vehicles. During the accident sequence, the flatbed semitrailer separated from the tractor and came to rest, straddling the median barrier and partially obstructing the left lane of I-95 north. About 11 minutes later, a northbound sport utility vehicle (SUV) traveling in the left lane and carrying nine Yale University students, collided with the semitrailer. The 20-year-old driver and three passengers in the SUV were killed. The surviving occupants were seriously injured.

The NTSB ruled out alcohol and drug use as factors in the accidents, but determined that fatigue was most likely a contributor to the accident involving the SUV. The driver's sleep schedule during the week of the accident was dictated primarily by college fraternity rush activities, which lasted from 9 p.m. to between 3 and 5 a.m. and occurred throughout the school week.

At the time of the accident, the SUV driver had been awake for more than 18 hours and was driving at the time he would normally be asleep. Early morning hours are a time of the day when most people experience a decrease in the level of physical and cognitive alertness. In addition, statements from surviving passengers implied that most, if not all, were asleep during the drive, suggesting a low level of stimulation within the SUV.

The NTSB also found that the likelihood of survival would have been significantly improved had the SUV been occupied by a maximum of five persons, the vehicle's designed capacity, rather than nine, and if all occupants had been wearing seatbelts. Only the driver and the front passenger were belted.

The NTSB's probable causes of the accidents cited numerous shortcomings in addition to driver fatigue. The probable cause of the first collision involving the tractor flatbed semitrailer was the loss of lateral stability, probably due to the operator driving too fast for conditions and to the presence of black ice on the roadway. Contributing to the accident was the inadequate treatment of the roadway by the Connecticut Department of Transportation in response to inclement weather, and the State's failure to install a median barrier capable of preventing crossovers by heavy vehicles.

The probable cause of the second collision was determined to be the SUV driver's failure to identify and avoid the flatbed semitrailer due to fatigue, in conjunction with the distraction from the median crossover accident in the southbound lanes. Examination of the vehicles led investigators to conclude that mechanical conditions did not cause or contribute to the accidents.

The investigation report, including the findings, probable cause, and safety recommendations, can be found on the "Publications" page of the Board's Web site, www.ntsb.gov.