

Other Motoring Risks

LJ Findley et al. Thorax. July (2001) Vol.56 #7 p 505.

An editorial on the role of sleep apnea in the cause of road traffic accidents. Sleep apnea is an absence of breathing during sleep, often associated with frequent awakening and sleepiness during daytime.

Sleep apnea affects 4% of working men and 2% of women and perhaps 5% of commercial drivers.

80% have not been diagnosed – all figures from the USA.

Sleep apnea contributes to inattentiveness, poor performance on driving simulators and, falling asleep at the wheel.

Accidents among the afflicted occur more frequently both at home and at work.

The authors propose that, when diagnosed, sleep apnea can be very successfully treated.

One particular experimental study of the effect of treating and not treating sleep apnea showed that successfully treating 500 patients for 3 years would prevent 180 serious crashes and 36 serious personal injuries.

Comment

The results suggest that for every million drivers, each year, over 700 serious injury accidents are potentially the result of sleep apnea. There may be implications for rehabilitation.

It is unlikely that undiagnosed victims of sleep apnea would be unaware of their occasional lapses of attention and tendency to fall asleep during the day, but may ascribe these to some other cause, and would not seek diagnosis.

Sleep apnea should not be confused with narcolepsy, where the victim may be unaware of an impending sleep episode, and would usually be advised against driving until the disorder was under control.

