

Drunk driving: Prevention must go beyond punitive measures, says expert

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Many tragedies involving drunk drivers continue to shock the nation, leaving behind grieving families and shattered lives. — Bernama photo

KOTA KINABALU (April 5): Recent tragedies involving drunk drivers continue to shock the nation, leaving behind grieving families and shattered lives.

These incidents are not isolated events, but part of a growing public safety concern that demands urgent and comprehensive attention.

Behind every headline is a painful story: a father who never returns home; a husband lost in an instant; or children left without a parent.

“Such deaths should not be viewed merely as accidents. They are preventable tragedies resulting from reckless and irresponsible behaviour,” said public health medicine specialist, Associate Professor Dr Abdul Rahman Ramdzan, in a statement.

According to him, driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs could significantly impair judgement, slow reaction time, and increase the likelihood of fatal collisions.

He viewed this, from both moral and public health perspectives, as ‘an unacceptable risk imposed on innocent road users’.

“From a public health standpoint, drunk driving is a well-established risk factor for road traffic injuries and deaths.

“Globally, alcohol consumption is linked to millions of deaths each year, with a significant proportion attributed to road accidents.

“The burden extends beyond mortality; survivors may suffer lifelong disabilities, while families endure emotional trauma and financial hardship,” said the senior medical lecturer, who is attached to the Department of Public Health Medicine under the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences of Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS).

Adding on, Dr Abdul Rahman said public health approaches emphasised that prevention must go beyond punitive measures alone.

He explained: “While Malaysia has strengthened legal provisions, including severe penalties under existing road transport laws, enforcement and deterrence remain ongoing challenges.

“The persistence of such cases suggests that punishment alone is insufficient without broader preventive strategies.

“A multi-level prevention approach is essential.

“Primary prevention includes reducing access to alcohol, controlling its availability, and promoting public awareness about the dangers of impaired driving.

“Secondary prevention involves strict enforcement, such as random breath testing and licence suspensions.

“Tertiary prevention focuses on rehabilitation, including treatment for alcohol dependency and behavioural interventions.”



Dr Abdul Rahman Ramdzan

Moreover, Dr Abdul Rahman stressed that addressing the social determinants of behaviour was crucial.

He pointed out that the normalisation of alcohol consumption in certain social settings could indirectly encourage risky practices such as driving after drinking.

“Changing societal attitudes is, therefore, as important as enforcing the law.

“Driving under the influence must be seen not just as illegal, but socially unacceptable.”

Dr Abdul Rahman said beyond punishment, there had also been a growing discussion regarding the need for greater justice for victims and their families.

He observed that in many cases, families would be left to cope with the emotional loss and financial difficulties – with limited support.

“Some have suggested exploring compensation mechanisms, including structured financial restitution, to ensure that the offenders bear a more comprehensive responsibility for the harm caused.

“Such approaches align with broader principles of ‘restorative justice’, where accountability extends beyond imprisonment to addressing the needs of victims.

“While legal frameworks may differ, the underlying principle remains universal: the loss of life must be acknowledged with seriousness, responsibility, and fairness,” he added.

Dr Abdul Rahman also regarded a ‘whole-of-society’ approach as necessary in addressing this issue effectively, pointing at the government agencies, enforcement bodies, communities, and even businesses selling alcoholic beverages, as ‘all having a role to play’.

“Establishments serving alcohol should take reasonable steps to discourage customers from driving while intoxicated.

“Public awareness campaigns must be continuous, not reactive,” he said.

Nonetheless, Dr Abdul Rahman said ultimately, the issue of drunk driving was about the value being placed on human life.

“Every life lost represents not just a statistic, but a profound and irreversible loss to a family and society.

“Preventing such tragedies requires courage to strengthen policies, enforce laws, and reshape social norms.

“No family should have to suffer the consequences of another person’s irresponsibility.

“Protecting lives on the road is not just a legal obligation, but a shared moral and public health responsibility,” stressed the public health medicine specialist.