

This Kaamatan season, don't drink and drive

BY MELVIN EBIN BONDI ON MAY 18, 2025, MONDAY AT 6:00 AM



Dr Muhammad Nazrin and Dr Siti Zuraina.



RECENT road accidents involving drivers under the influence of alcohol continue to remind us of a serious reality, that one wrong decision behind the wheel can cost lives. These incidents continue to happen, even though they are entirely preventable.

In a recent case that shocked the nation, a young Bangladeshi couple visiting Malaysia were involved in a crash just minutes after arriving in the country, when an alleged drunk driver collided with the e-hailing vehicle they were travelling in. The young man was killed, while his partner sustained serious injuries. What was meant to be the beginning of a holiday ended in tragedy within moments.

Cases like this often spark strong public reaction not only because lives are lost, but because these deaths could have been avoided. Although alcohol-related crashes may represent a small proportion of total road fatalities, they continue to draw strong concern for this reason. Unlike many other causes of road accidents, this is one where a single decision could have changed the outcome completely.

This risk is more common than we think. Alcohol use is not uncommon in Malaysia. Data from the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2023 shows that about one in ten adults reported drinking alcohol in the past year, and among those who drink, nearly half engage in excessive drinking. Most are men, particularly in the younger age group of 20 to 39 years. When alcohol consumption is present within the community, the risk of impaired driving becomes a real and ongoing concern.

As the month of May is closely associated with Kaamatan and harvest festival celebrations across Sabah, this reminder becomes even more important. If alcohol is consumed during gatherings, the safest choice is simple: do not drive. Plan earlier, appoint a designated driver, use ride-hailing services, or stay overnight. A celebration should never end in tragedy.

Alcohol affects the body in ways that make driving unsafe, even when a person feels “fine.” It slows reaction time, reduces coordination, and impairs judgment. Most importantly, it affects judgement earlier than people realise, often before they recognise that they are no longer capable of driving safely. This is why many who drive after drinking believe they are still in control, when in fact their ability to respond to danger is already compromised.

The consequences of this don't just affect the driver. Other road users, such as drivers, pedestrians, passengers, and families, can become victims of a decision they had no part in. In the recent case, the couple were simply passengers in an e-hailing vehicle, with no control over what was about to happen. A single moment changed their lives completely. These are not just numbers we read in reports, but they are real people, real families, and real loss.

Malaysia takes this issue seriously. The law imposes heavy penalties on those found driving under the influence. A first-time offender can face fines between RM10,000 and RM30,000, imprisonment of up to two years, and a minimum two-year suspension of their driving licence. For repeat offences, penalties increase significantly, including higher fines, longer jail terms, and extended licence bans.

When alcohol-related driving results in injury or death, the consequences are far more severe. Under the Road Transport Act, causing death while driving under the influence carries long-term imprisonment, substantial fines, and prolonged disqualification from driving. In the recent fatal case, the suspect is being investigated under Section 44(1) of the Act, which provides for imprisonment of up to 15 years and a fine of up to RM100,000. These penalties reflect a clear message: driving under the influence is not a minor mistake; it is a serious offence with life-changing consequences.

Yet despite strict laws, such incidents continue to occur. This raises an important question: why do people still take the risk?

Often, it comes down to everyday decisions. Some believe the journey is short. Others feel confident that they are still capable of driving. For some, the inconvenience of arranging alternative transport seems too troublesome. These thoughts are common, but they are also dangerous. Accidents do not depend on distance or confidence, but they happen when judgment is impaired.

Choosing not to drive after drinking does come with a cost. It may require planning, waiting for a ride, or changing one's routine. But these are small sacrifices compared to the consequences of a crash. The loss of a life, the burden of guilt, or the legal consequences of harming others far outweigh any temporary inconvenience.

Preventing drink-driving is not just an individual responsibility but a shared one. Friends, family members, and even bystanders have a role to play. If someone has been drinking, those around them should not remain silent. Party organisers and entertainment outlets also share this responsibility by promoting safe practice such as encouraging designated drivers and supporting safer transport arrangements.

Communities also play a crucial role in shaping behaviour. When safe practice becomes the norm, it influences others to follow. Conversations about road safety, reminders among peers, and a culture of looking out for one another can significantly reduce risk. People are more likely to make responsible decisions when they feel supported by those around them.

It is also important to address a common misconception that driving under the influence only affects certain individuals. In reality, it can happen to anyone. It is not limited by age, background, or experience. Recognising this helps shift the mindset from “this won't happen to me” to “this is something I must actively prevent.”

This matters because it shows that the risk is not something rare or isolated. It exists within our communities, among people who are active and mobile. When alcohol use is combined with driving, the risk becomes much more serious.

Practical steps can make a difference. Planning is one of the most effective strategies. If you know you will be consuming alcohol, arrange for a designated driver, use ride-hailing services, or plan to stay overnight. Making these decisions early, before drinking begins, can prevent poor judgment later.

Equally important is the willingness to intervene. If a friend or family member is about to drive after drinking, speak up. It may feel uncomfortable, but it is far better than dealing with the consequences of silence. A simple action, such as taking away car keys or offering help, can save lives.

Beyond individual and community action, this is also a public health and system-level issue. Reducing drink-driving requires continuous efforts from multiple sectors, including enforcement, education, and community engagement. Authorities play a role in strengthening road safety measures and enforcing laws consistently. At the same time, public health professionals contribute by identifying risk patterns, raising awareness through targeted communication, and working with communities to encourage safer behaviours and early planning before alcohol consumption. These combined efforts help create an environment where safer choices become easier and more widely accepted.

Ultimately, preventing drunk-driving is not just about strict laws, but about making safer choices part of everyday behaviour. As we celebrate Kaamatan, let us also protect our families, friends, and communities. If you drink, do not drive. That decision matters.

*** Melvin Ebin Bondi is a PhD candidate in Public Health at Universiti Malaysia Sabah. He writes a weekly public health column for The Borneo Post. This article incorporates insights from Dr Siti Zuraina Ain Amat and Dr. Muhammad Nazrin Ab Rahim, Doctor of Public Health (DrPH) candidates at Universiti Malaysia Sabah.**