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The quality of life of car crash survivors: a call to enhance the road safety agenda

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Background: The "road toll" has proven a compelling focus and measure of success for road safety interventions. Major reductions in road fatalities have coincided with increased likelihood of surviving serious crashes. As the burden of traffic injury shifts from the premature loss of life to a reduced quality-of-life, the momentum gained by the road safety effort is threatened by minimal information regarding the long-term health of crash survivors.

Research objective: To determine the long-term health-related quality-of-life of drivers and injured passengers surviving serious injury-involved car crashes.

Methods: A consecutive series of drivers involved in serious car crashes and a random sample of the driving public were recruited to a large-scale population-based cohort study in Auckland, New Zealand. Participants were interviewed at baseline, and 4 and 18 months following the crash or initial survey. The principal outcome measure was the Short Form-36 (SF-36), a multi-dimensional health status questionnaire.

Results: Overall, 251 drivers and 74 passengers were interviewed at baseline and at 4 months following the crash / initial survey. Approximately 89% of participants (222 drivers, 66 passengers) were re-interviewed at 18 months. Changes in age- and sex-standardised SF-36 scores suggest significant deterioration in the physical and mental health of crash survivors compared with the driving public of Auckland and the general population of New Zealand.

Conclusions: Survivors of serious car crashes sustain important losses in health-related quality of life. The extent and characteristics of long-term adverse health outcomes call for a renewed effort to improve and advance road safety measures.