An accident is a crash is a collision – or is it?

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Abstract

An accident is a crash is a collision. Semantics, most certainly, but is the use of the "A" word hurting road safety?

In terms of road trauma, the majority of crashes where people are killed or injured can be attributed to human factors such as speeding, impairment by either drugs and/or alcohol, non-use of occupant restraints or helmets, and tiredness. Mechanical factors can also be a consideration.

The presentation will examine the perceptions and definition of the terms and how this might impact on community understanding of road trauma and telling the road safety story across all media platforms.

Background

Accident, when used as a noun, is defined as "an unfortunate incident that happens unexpectedly and unintentionally, typically resulting in damage or injury".

A collision, when used as a noun, is defined as "an instance of one moving object or person striking violently against another. Yet, under each definition, each word is used as a synonym for the other".

The work of Haddon, between 1963 and 1972, in rejecting the term accident and redefining causational factors to take in elements such as engineering, the environment and education, has also been considered. Haddon's research also defines the major stages of an injurious event.

This abstract and presentation will provide advice to NSW Police Force Media Unit recruits in obtaining a functional understanding of road trauma and the use/application of related terminology.

Why then are some sectors of the road safety world and the media using the term accident?
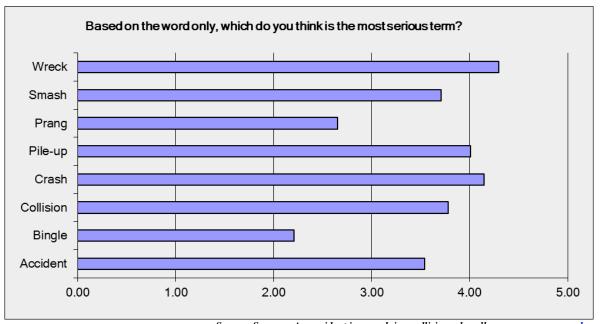
An online survey was conducted via Survey Monkey for two months. There were 132 respondents with over half falling into the 30-60 year age groups. Occupationally, the majority of respondents were in law enformcment, media and office/administration roles.

When asked how often they dealt with road trauma related issues, more than half of the respondents indicated they did not encounter these issues that often.

A number of potential synonyms for road trauma were listed in alphabetical order. From this list and based on perception of the word only, respondents were asked to rank them in terms of seriousness.

Just over half of the remaining respondents (64) rated the term "wreck" as extremely serious followed by "pile-up" (44) and "crash" (32). Only nine respondents considered the term accident" to be extremely serious. Only four of the 132 respondents skipped the question.

Figure 1. Overall survey results regarding perception of road trauma synonyms

At the Bathurst 1000 in 2015, Chaz Mostert lost control of his car during a qualifying session, hit the track wall and was seriously injured. Speed was widely recognised as being the cause. Media coverage focussed on calling it a crash, smash or a collision. However, those in the commentary box including former drivers often used the term accident.

Sydney television and radio identity Glenn Wheeler was hit by a van while riding his motor scooter at Woolooware in 2015. The female driver was convicted of driving under the influence of cannabis and negligent driving causing grievous bodily harm. His fellow broadcasters described the incident as a tragic accident.

Dr Brian Owler, referenced "terrible avoidable accidents" in his address to the 2015 Australasian Road Safety Conference.

Does the attribution of blame play a part in what word has been used to describe the event that has led to a person being killed or injured?

In line with the conference theme it is important when discussing road trauma that we are innovative in our choice of words and not reach for obvious terminology, when other terms would have greater impact.

References

Speech by Doctor Brian Owler to 2015 Australasian Road Safety Conference 2015. Retrived from (https://ama.com.au/media/ama-speech-australasian-road-safety-conference)