In his photo documentary ‘When Lives Collide’, involving RoadPeace members, Paul Wenham-Clarke explains why he has used the term ‘incident’ rather than ‘accident’:

Until the day comes when someone knocks at your door to give you devastating news of a loved one, you will not truly grasp the impact of road traffic death. How many of the stories you will read in this book fall into this category?

Road Crash - not Road ‘Accident’

Just as domestic violence is more than a disturbance, and the Police are a service rather than a force...

It's no accident that road traffic victims say crash!

3 ‘Accident’ is not appropriate

The word ‘accident’ should be replaced by words such as crash, incident, fatality or road death in official statements and documents.

Support for families of road death victims, 1994.

This was the first recommendation of the two year Independent Working Party convened by Victim Support (the government funded charity for victims of crime whose mandate does not include road crash victims). This working party included representatives from the Home Office, CPS, Police, Coroners Society, the British Association of A&E Medicine, as well as RoadPeace and other charities. RoadPeace provided road victim evidence for the two year work and report, based on 150 case studies.

...people do not have any idea how upset and offended we feel when we hear the ‘A’ word. How can road users be seriously expected to respond positively to road safety initiatives when every road crash resulting from the neglect of such directives is thoughtlessly explained away, even by those issuing them, as being an ‘accident’? Even when the perpetrator of a road tragedy is flouted with drink or drugs, the word ‘accident’ is used with distressing persistence in the media, in the courts and down the pub, continuing to reinforce road user complacency.

Cyril Myrescough, Co-Down, Chair, Pedestrians Association, 1982 - 1991

RoadPeace and road crash victims want everyone dealing with or reporting on road safety and collision issues, including the media, road safety and law enforcement professionals, not to use the term ‘accident’ when referring to road traffic crashes.

www.whenlivescollide.co.uk

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It's not like he was murdered. It was only an accident.

- words from a Police Officer in 2002 to bereaved mother, whose only son was killed by an uninsured driver who had driven through red lights.

The first step in changing human behaviour must be to stop thinking in terms of accidents and to talk exclusively of crashes.

Nicholas Faith, CRASH The limits of car safety, 1997.

RoadPeace has updated this briefing sheet for the first UN Global Road Safety Week. It also responds to the multi-million pound investigation led by Sir John Stevens, into the road crash in which Diana, Princess of Wales, was killed.

The investigation concluded that it was a simple accident, until, perhaps, at the same time confirming the existence of a culture of secrecy and self-protection which may not have been a pre-mediated assassination but in which the involved and possibly all the others involved were certainly no accident. This is why the inquest into the Princess’s death is now being held with a jury.

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...people do not have any idea of how upset and offended we feel when we hear the ‘A’ word, which seems to be intentionally belittling the devastation suffered by families of innocent loved ones, cruelly and needlessly killed or seriously injured in road traffic crashes caused by the criminal actions of another road user.

Bridget Wall, RoadPeace East Anglia group

Save ‘accident’ for spilled milk and minor occurrences, not for describing the leading cause of death and disability in the UK. Terminology is important, not only out of respect for the feelings of those affected, but as set down in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) and the Oxford Textbook of Medicine, to ensure that proper priority is given to reducing the risk of crashes and ensuring a fitting response to loss of life and quality of life.

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‘Accident’ is not accurate

The Oxford Dictionary defines an accident as an event that is without apparent cause or that is unexpected. Its use in the context of child road deaths could not be more inappropriate. More is known about when, where and why child pedestrian-motor vehicle collisions occur, and who will die as a result, than for almost any other disease in childhood. It would make more sense to talk of a case of accidental meningitis or accidental leukaemia.

Prof. Ian Roberts, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

Without cause? Unexpected?
The causes of many crashes are well known. We know that there is an increased risk of a collision when drink driving or speeding are involved. Yet despite two decades of enforcement and education, one in six UK fatal crashes still involves a drink driver and in 20% of fatal crashes involve speeding. While speeding is on the decrease, when given the choice half of all drivers choose to break the 30 mph speed limit. Endemic is a more accurate description for speeding than is accidental.

Fatigue is believed to contribute to 10% of all fatal crashes. Fatigue is a condition that comes gradually and with clear warning signs, and cannot be considered unexpected.

In 2001, the British Medical Journal banned the use of the word ‘accident’ to avoid the connotation of unpredictability, since ‘most injuries and their precipitating events are predictable and preventable events’.

Fifteen years ago, leading epidemiologists described the belief that injuries are accidents as ‘the last folklore subscribed to by rational men’.

2000 years ago Aristotle warned that ‘there is no science of the accident’.

Police should not approach any investigation with the foregone assumption that it was an accident. Thus the UK’s Road Death Investigation Manual recommends that fatal crash scenes should be treated as potential homicide scenes.

Yet road crashes have not been given the same priority as other crimes since many are believed to be unintentional, and therefore less culpable. This discrimination is evidenced by:

• Traffic law enforcement is not a police core function although over four times as many people are killed on the road than are murdered. Traffic police officers have declined in numbers, while the Police have increased the officers available, including through transfers from traffic police, for preventing street crime and terrorism. At present in the Metropolitan Police Service only 2% of the officers are traffic officers.

• The new Home Office Victims’ Code excludes all people injured in crashes, even when crimes, such as speeding and drink driving are involved. Victims of minor property crime have more rights guaranteed in law than do victims permanently disabled in crashes caused by the culpable acts of others.

• Limited resources are allocated to a road death investigation. The Department for Transport estimates that the current resources allocated to a fatal road crash investigation amount to £1600, and £220 for a serious injury road crash.

• The most common charge in a fatal crash (and even this charge is only brought in a minority of cases) is that of ‘causing death by careless driving’, an either-way offence only and there is still no change regarding injuries, which remain unmentioned.

Thanks go to London’s Mayor Ken Livingstone, RoadPeace’s first patron, for requesting that the Metropolitan Police do not use the term ‘accident’. Also to June Webb, coordinator of RoadPeace’s Manchester group, who was successful in getting Manchester City Council not to refer to crashes as ‘accidents’.

In the mid 1990s, the US National Highway Traffic Safety Administration banned the use of the word ‘accident’ stating that ‘continuation of the use of this word is a lack of public perception of the preventability of injuries and fatalities in the highway environment’.

Use of ‘accident’ takes responsibility away from the person who is culpable—through incompetence, aggression or other failures to drive safely.

Peter Salter, RoadPeace London.

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