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The Fight Against Teenage Drunk Driving: Saving Lives and Keeping Preventable Injuries out of the Emergency Department

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Teenage drunk driving kills 8 teens every day. Forty percent of alcohol-related fatal car crashes involve teens. Sixty percent of all teen deaths in car accidents are alcohol related.

On March 14 the University of California Irvine (UCI) Emergency Medicine Interest Group (EMIG) addressed these statistics at Segerstrom High School in Santa Ana, CA. “More Than Just A Drink” is a half-day event for high school juniors and seniors designed to reinforce the dangers of drinking and driving. The day began with a staged car crash on the track in front of the bleachers. Two wrecked cars were donated and positioned together, windows smashed from a head-on collision. Over 1,000 students watched while the Santa Ana Police Department (SAPD) and Santa Ana Fire Department (SAFD) enacted the aftermath of a collision between two cars full of Segerstrom High School students (Figure 1 and 2). In one car, 4 students not going to the dance were injured. In the other, the driver had been drinking on the way to prom but was uninjured. His date was killed.

The scenario, narrated by a 911 call of someone at the scene, featured the voices of the police officers and fire fighters involved in the incident. After the students watched

the scene unfold and saw their “bloody” classmates taken off in an ambulance, they convened in the theater where Dr. Bharath Chakravarthy, an assistant clinical professor of in the Department of Emergency Medicine at UC Irvine, and Deseree, a speaker from Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), shared presentations and personal experiences. Then it was off to small group discussions where 15-20 high school students sat with 2 medical students and discussed drinking and driving in their own lives and the pressures of being a teenager. Through the hard work of the school administration, the medical students and faculty of UCI School of Medicine, the Santa Ana PD and Santa Ana FD and volunteers from MADD, the event was a huge success.

We all know the dangers of drunk driving—we see it every day in the emergency department (ED). However, it is still novel to these 16-, 17- and 18-year-olds. From talking in groups, students agreed that about 60 to 70 percent of the school drank alcohol. Far more surprising was close to 100% of juniors and seniors drove themselves but only about 10% of them had driver’s licenses. Money and time were reasons for not having a license. Parents also let their children drive without a license and did not encourage applying for a license at the Department of Motor Vehicles.



Figure 1. Over 1000 high school juniors and seniors watch the aftermath of a drunk driving crash.



Figure 2. Santa Ana Police Department and Fire Department volunteered their time to recreate a crash scene.

Obviously, driving under the influence and alcohol-related injuries are important to adolescents and adults on a personal level because their lives are in the balance. Additionally, these issues are public health concerns. Hospitals spend billions of dollars every year on alcohol-related injuries. Aside from the tragedies that stem from drinking and driving, the aftermath of almost all of those crashes and injuries is a visit to the ED and a hospital bill. This represents a huge financial burden and in a time when these resources are shrinking.

What sets alcohol-related motor vehicle collisions apart from other complaints treated in the ED is that they are completely preventable. Imagine the time, money, resources and lives that could be saved by keeping drunk drivers off

the road. It all starts with education at a young age. That is precisely why events, such as “More Than Just A Drink,” are important—they are their own kind of preventative medicine. The event itself cost very little—the Santa Ana PD and FD, 50 medical students, MADD and UC Irvine attendings all donated their time. Even the wrecked cars were donated. All it took was time and effort to reach over 1,000 high school students. It’s a great start and something that the UCI EMIG will continue to do, but there are thousands of high schools students that don’t ever see these events or receive education on drunk driving. Statistics are improving, but we can save lives, reduce the ED census and reduce healthcare costs by putting significant effort into educational programs that show the dangers of drunk driving in a concrete manner.