

Drowsy driving adds danger to the road

By Alex Kline
 Special to The Sentinel

Sometimes more dangerous than drunk or distracted driving is driving while drowsy, local sleep experts report.

A wrecked van portraying the dangerous effects of drowsy driving is on display through Nov. 14 outside the Glenn Dale Volunteer Fire Association building in response to Drowsy Driving Prevention Week.

Doctors Community Hospital Sleep Center in Lanham chose to showcase the crunched van for the first time this year to raise awareness that accidents are caused by drowsy driving, said Dr. Riad Dakheel, medical director of the center.

The United States is a sleep-deprived society — seven to eight hours of sleep at night is recommended, but many Americans do not get the necessary amount, said Dakheel.

The National Sleep Foundation reports 28 percent of Americans have admitted to falling asleep while driving and 54 percent said they have driven while drowsy.

Fatigue causes slower reaction

times, vision impairment, lack of judgment and setbacks in processing information, all imperative to safe driving, according to the National Sleep Foundation. Sleepiness also increases the chance of three to four second microsleeps, which means those driving at 65 miles per hour could drive the length of a football field while unconscious.

A research study by the University of Virginia found that accidents are four times more likely to occur when driving while drowsy than otherwise. These accidents are also more likely to be fatal because your muscles cannot react fast enough, said Dakheel.

In Australia, people who are seen as fatigued while driving can be stopped by police, just as if they were driving while drunk. This implementation is something that Dakheel believes should be done within our area as well.

“Teenage drowsy driving is very prevalent because teens believe they are invincible. They think they can go to school, stay up late, and have jobs,” he said.

Mike McLoughlin, a junior at the University of Maryland, said this

semester he was driving on Route 1 after midnight when he drifted into the oncoming lane of traffic due to drowsy driving. He saw the headlights, and immediately swerved back into his lane.

“I could have died or killed someone else. That’s kinda crazy,” he said.

Dana Schwartz, a freshman at the University of Maryland, said that she has driven while drowsy quite often.

“People aren’t going to stop driving just because they’re tired because they have to get places. People are tired all the time,” she said.

Both students said seeing this vehicle did not change their decision to stop driving while drowsy because they have seen many exhibits like this one, so the shock value has worn off.

While there is more awareness about drowsy driving now than five or 10 years ago, Dakheel said more still needs to be done.

“We have a long way to go, but we need to patrol drowsy driving because it is fatal. When asleep, you are not able to brake — even drunk drivers can brake,” he said.





PHOTO BY ALEX KLINE

Mike McLoughlin, junior at the University of Maryland, inspects the damage of the van due to someone driving while drowsy. The van is on display at the Glenn Dale Volunteer Fire Association building for Drowsy Driving Prevention Week.