

## Some legislatures favor required safety features

By EDITH WOOTEN  
Tar Heel Staff Writer

At least 10,000 Americans die each year in automobile accidents.

It is the leading cause of death for those under 34.

At least 65 percent of these deaths could be avoided if people wore seat belts, said B.J. Campbell, director of the N.C. Highway Safety Research Center in Chapel Hill.

And with this in mind, many lawmakers have given a lot of attention to the idea of making safety standards mandatory.

Two years ago the N.C. legislature became the sixth state to enact a law requiring the use of child restraint seats. Since then, researchers have seen a sharp decrease in infant fatalities in automobile crashes.

A report put out by the UNC's Highway Safety Research Center said that more than half of the children under two years of age who were in accidents last year were wearing the restraints and of them, none were killed.

"In summary, crash results indicate that restraint use is up... with a proportional reduction in deaths and injury," the report states.

Presently 40 states have enacted a child restraint law.

Three weeks ago, the Supreme Court ruled that the federal government should not have rejected a requirement that all new cars have a passive occupancy restraint system, such as automatic seat belts and air bags.

Nils Lofgren, of the Motor Vehicles Manufacturers' Association, said that the auto industry favored testing new methods of occupancy restraint.

There are ways that the driver can forego wearing the automatic seat belt, and the air bag is only operational with a head-on collision at a speed over 12 mph, Lofgren said.

"Until tests are finished, we are in favor of what we are sure of, the lap and shoulder belts," he said.

Campbell said that motor vehicle accidents are by far the biggest killer of people under 34. Each year the HSRC expects two or three UNC students will die in car accidents, Campbell said.

"It is so profound in its importance, that for the rest of the population the overall death ratio is getting better as the health of the country improves," he said. "College aged people are dying faster more often, because they die in automobile crashes. And the reason they die is because they don't buckle up."

Three or four states have made significant attempts to get a seat belt law passed. The fact they failed is not the end of the story, he said.

"My crystal ball tells me that in the next three or four years we're going to find a state or two that will pass it and fairly enforce it," Campbell said. I believe that the results will be so dramatic that what happened with the child restraint law will happen here."

## Seat belts pay off

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The Chapel Hill area is almost at the point of leading the nation in yet another activity.

It has nothing to do with academics or even sports. It has everything to do with life.

Since April, Chapel Hill and Carrboro drivers have increased their usage of seat belts by 50 percent.

The area is tied with Seattle, Wash., for the highest percentage ever recorded in the nation. Thirty-two percent of the drivers here, according to a study done by the UNC's Highway Safety Research Center (HSRC), are wearing seat belts.

Dr. B.J. Campbell, director of the HSRC, said that this was due to the unique area-wide campaign titled Seat Belts Pay Off. The campaign gives prizes to drivers if they are wearing seat belts when they are stopped in local parking lots.

"Our premise here is that people just don't think about wearing seat belts," Campbell said.

The campaign is aimed at making people think about buckling up as a normal procedure to starting their cars.

"Our daily experience is that it feels safe to drive in a car," Campbell said. "Most of the time we get where we want uneventfully. But those rare events occur often enough for it to be a leading cause of death."

Since the idea of seat belts paying off seemed remote, Campbell said that the center tried to make it pay off in a more immediate sense.

"That's how we came up with the campaign," he said. "It's the idea of rewarding positive behavior which strengthens it and makes it habit forming."

So far, 7,000 to 9,000 drivers have been stopped and 3,000 gifts have been given away since April, Campbell said.

Winners have received \$5 cash awards, free dinners at McDonalds, AM transistor radios, packages of lightbulbs and tickets to the Mike Cross concert and the Morehead Planetarium.

Winners also become eligible for one monthly drawing for \$500, and on Oct. 15 a drawing will be held for a grand prize of \$1,000.

To evaluate the success of the project, there are 17



Tar Heel/Lori Thomas

### Hamburgers' gift certificates prizes in the Seat Belts Pay Off campaign.

observation points in the Chapel Hill and Carrboro area where researchers count the number of people wearing seat belts at different times of the day.

"Nationally, if you went out and counted cars you'd see 10 or 11 percent of the drivers buckled up," he said. In Chapel Hill it is much higher.

"We try to be as visible as possible, so that we will remind people that it does pay off to buckle up."

Campbell stressed the importance of what the campaign is trying to accomplish.

"If a genie came out of a bottle and said: OK, you can have one wish. If you push this button, no

one will ever drive drunk again. If you push the other button, everyone would buckle up from now on. I would unhesitatingly push the seat belt button because (wearing seat belts) actually saves more lives," he said.

The reason Campbell stressed this point, he said, was that people have an intuitive understanding now that drunk drivers kill.

"I don't think there is a comprehensive understanding of the significance of wearing a belt."

"We consider it the most important highway safety issue there is," he said.



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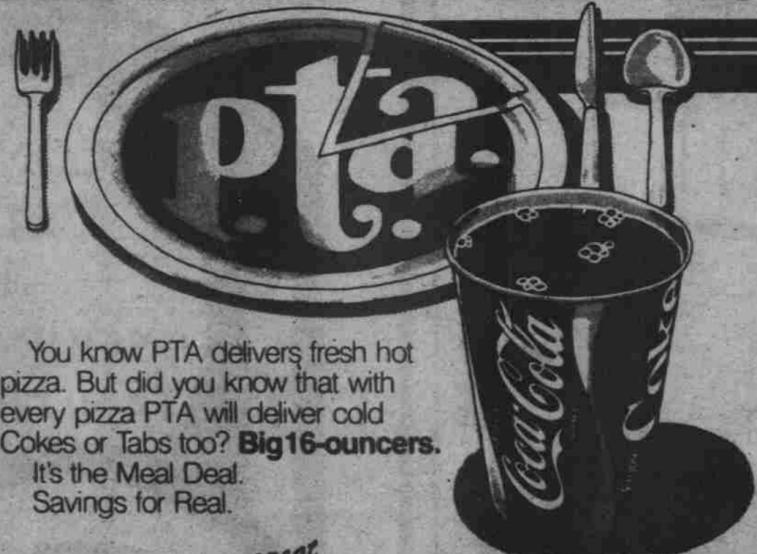
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