



SAFETY

Graduation night's silent killer

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Nicole and Mark were found dead on the side of the highway just three miles from their high school the morning after graduation. On the side of the car was a sign that read "Class of 2005."

It wasn't alcohol that led to the accident—it was sleep deprivation. The couple had left a school-sponsored all-night graduation party at 7:00 a.m. Nicole was driving. She didn't drink at the party, but she had been awake since the morning before and fell asleep at the wheel.

This tragedy—I've changed the names—is based on a case I worked with in California a few years ago. It illustrates the danger of driving drowsy—the second biggest killer on our highways. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration puts the number of such accidents at around 100,000, approximately 1,550 of which result in fatalities and

71,000 in injuries.

This "silent killer" is often overlooked as a cause of accidents, however. Police are not trained to detect sleep-related crashes. When alcohol is suspected, an officer can test to determine whether a driver is intoxicated. No such test exists for sleep deprivation.

Research has shown that the effects of sleep deprivation are similar to the effects of alcohol intoxication. One such study was reported in 1997 by D. Dawson and K. Reid, researchers at the University of South Australia's Center for Sleep Research. They found that when subjects were kept awake for 17 hours, their performance on a cognitive-psychomotor test was the same as that of a rested person with a blood alcohol concentration of 0.05 percent. At 24 hours of sustained wakefulness, performance was equivalent to a BAC of 0.10 percent.

In 16 states drivers are considered legally drunk with a BAC of 0.08; the other states set a level of 0.10.

A widespread risk

All-night graduation parties are increasingly popular because they reduce the risk of alcohol and drug abuse by students who might attend other, non-supervised events. But they expose students to a new danger.

Nobody planning the all-night graduation party Nicole and Mark attended considered that it's just as dangerous to allow students to drive after staying up all night as it is to allow them to drive under the influence of alcohol.

Data gathered through a national telephone survey I conducted of more than 300 high schools across the nation revealed that fatigue and sleep deprivation were generally not considered potential risks by the planners of all-night parties. Rather, the focus was on an alcohol- and drug-free event.

Typically, event planners keep high school graduates entertained from the beginning of the party until the next morning with a variety of activities, in-

cluding music videos and competitive sports. For many graduates, taking part in these events means staying awake for 24 hours. When they leave in the morning—unchecked and unsupervised—their condition is similar to being impaired by alcohol or drugs.

But students need not be placed in this life-threatening situation.

Many states now educate drivers not only about the dangers of driving while intoxicated but also about the dangers of driving while drowsy. School leaders have a duty to protect students from known risks—and that includes the clear risk of driving while drowsy.

Preventing tragedies

A few easy and effective precautions will protect students.

First, consider transporting students in school buses, or leased buses, to the event and home after the event. For little cost, the school can provide safe transportation after a fun-filled, sleep-deprived night for graduates.

Even if transportation is provided, adopt clear policies and procedures to protect students from driving while sleep deprived. Specify that under no circumstance will any student, staff member, or parent chaperone be allowed to drive after attending an all-night graduation party. Students, staff, and parent chaperones must make arrangements for others to drop them off at the start of the event and pick them up after it has ended.

No reasonable educator would allow an intoxicated student to get behind the wheel of a car and drive away. Why allow a sleep-deprived student to do the same? Assessing the risk and planning contingencies will help keep students safe—and protect schools from liability.

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