

Accidents happen. But some crashes are anything but accidental

No minor mistakes in judgement here: crashes result from premeditated, deliberate disregard for law and safety

This is not a subject I enjoy going over, but I'm hoping that perhaps we can learn a thing or two for next time; maybe prevent "next time" from happening at all.

I'd like to go over two separate accidents, and if or how they could have been avoided. Actually, in my personal definitions, we'll be discussing one "accident" and one "crash." You'll see what I mean.

First, let's talk about the recent "incident" in Ontario: a huge 38-vehicle pileup on a snowy stretch of Highway 401 near Woodstock that sent six people to hospital. Everyone involved concurred it was an utter miracle that no one was killed.

Emergency crews attending the scene blamed the accident on slippery roads, white out conditions and yes—you guessed it—unwary drivers.

I read the news articles, and many of those interviewed mentioned they were headed to see plays or hockey games in Toronto when they drove into the



**Road
Wise**

Paul
Allen

severe weather and road conditions. Others were heading to or from Toronto as part of the daily suburban commute. Now, they never mentioned whether they knew the road conditions ahead, but they probably didn't think it was going to be that bad, or they might have reconsidered their decision to leave. But, overall, I believe the poor folks involved in this accident weren't guilty of deliberately tempting fate.

Poor judgement

Some were, as the police noted, guilty of not paying enough attention to the serious threat surrounding them. Exercising poor judgment, perhaps, in assessing the appropriate following distance, and more than likely

traveling too fast for the dangerous conditions.

Lesson learned. When faced with severe winter weather conditions, slow down, leave plenty of space between you and them and never take your eyes off the road and your mirrors.

This, to me, was a terrible accident; I don't believe the drivers involved meant to push the odds, they just weren't paying enough attention.

The next "incident" is harder to rationalize.

The Vancouver, B.C. newspapers have recently reported a rash of street-racing on Marine Drive in West Vancouver. For those unfamiliar with the area, Marine Drive is a very narrow, winding stretch of road running along the ocean, through one of the most affluent neighbourhoods in Canada.

In this "incident," a 17-year-old driver in a BMW was racing against his buddy's Mercedes at around 11 p.m. Police estimated the BMW driver lost

control and hit the West Vancouver Public Library brick wall at upwards of 120 km/h. The driver was wearing a seatbelt and survived; his passenger was not, and died in hospital after being thrown from the vehicle. The Mercedes fled the scene, but five kids have since turned themselves in. By all accounts, everyone involved was a popular, upstanding, smart student.

130 km/h in a 50 km/h zone

Police have recently nailed five other vehicles traveling more than 130 km/hr through the same stretch of road—a 50 km/h zone, if you can believe it.

This wasn't an accident. This was a crash. This wasn't a minor mistake in judgment, or an unfortunate lack of attention. This was premeditated behaviour that resulted in the death of a young man, and ongoing therapy and guilt for his friends.

Do you think there's a difference? Are they both "accidents"? In my mind, an accident is something that

could not have been prevented. I've stretched that definition here, as we've noted that there may have been actions the drivers in Ontario could have taken to avoid that huge pile-up.

But what do you think about the incident in West Vancouver? Does it fit your definition of an accident? And either way, what can we learn from the tragedy?

To be honest, I looked at my two-year-old son, and the first thing that came to my mind, what I "learned" from the story, was that even good kids make bad decisions. And I'm afraid.

That's it for this week. Until next week, be **RoadWise**.

Paul Allen is Road Safety Manager for Manitoba Public Insurance. He would like to hear from you. His e-mail address is pallen@mpi.mb.ca and his mailing address is Room 824, 234 Donald Street, Box 6300, Winnipeg, MB R3C 4A4.

Visit MPI's Web site @ www.mpi.mb.ca