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Let's protect children from road crashes

By Stephanie Aketch

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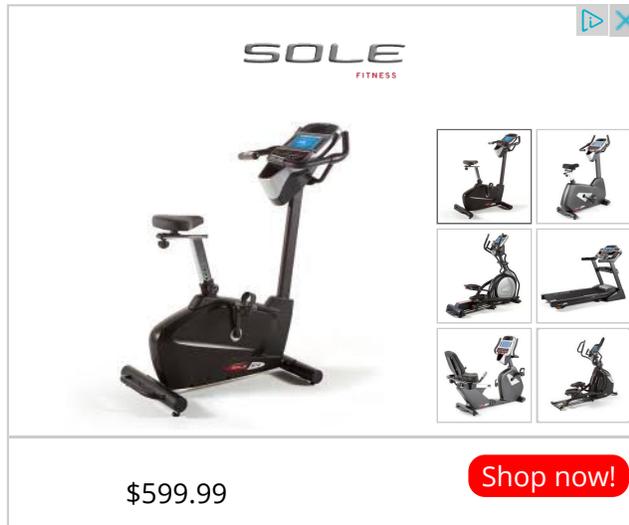
NAIROBI: Every third Sunday of November is the World Day of Remembrance for Road Crash Victims. This day, initiated by road victims in 1993 and adopted by the UN on October 26, 2005, is dedicated to remembering the many millions killed and injured in road crashes, as well as the loss and tragedy suffered by their families.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recently released the Global Status Report on Road Safety 2015 that indicated 1.25 million people die each year from traffic crashes. Kenya accounts for an estimated 12,891 of those deaths. Many of these are children, who are highly vulnerable on our roads. While the Government dedicates significant resources to addressing terror threats in Kenya, it is clear that the victims of road crashes are far greater in number and as such there is a need to improve road safety.

In Kenya, we have the opportunity to address the high rate of injuries and fatalities from road crashes through the Traffic (Amendment) Bill 2014, which aims to reduce speeds around schools so that children no longer risk their lives getting to school. The WHO report states that "Where motorised traffic mixes with pedestrians, cyclists, and moped riders, the speed limit must be under 30km/h. This is due to the vulnerability of these road users at increasing speed (an adult pedestrian has less than a 20 per cent chance of dying if struck by a car at less than 50km/h)". The Traffic Amendment Bill seeks to protect children by following this guidance for roads near schools throughout Kenya.

I recently talked to a road crash victim at Kenyatta National Hospital who was recruited into a study aiming to measure the long-term social and economic impact of injuries. Keeping with the ethics of the study, his name and details will remain anonymous. The

patient was a hit-and-run victim, who is convinced that it was an accident. "Ilikuwa ajali. Ni mipango ya Mungu. Hiyo ni maisha," he said. (It was an accident. It was in God's



plan. That's life.)

As Prof Ian Roberts explains, an accident is an event that is without apparent cause or is unexpected. However, when it is used in the context of child road deaths, the term accident could not be more inappropriate. This is because more is known about when, where and why a child pedestrian-motor vehicle collision occurs, and who will die as a result, than for any other disease in childhood. We have the information and the answer to stop our children dying, and that is lowering of speeds around schools. If we know the reason and have the ability to stop it, then can we still consider a child dying on Kenya's roads an accident?

According to the Global Status Report on Road Safety 2015, the leading cause of death among people aged 15–29 years in 2012 was road crashes. The Traffic (Amendment) Bill 2014 remains a key tool in mitigating road crash-related deaths and disabilities among our children. The patient I spoke of earlier was just 21 years old. Because of the nature of his injuries, he will remain hospitalised for many months and still require post-hospitalisation rehabilitation. But he is not alone. I have seen many more. Some as young as nine years old.

We have mistakenly become accustomed to referring to road crashes as road accidents. These terms are not interchangeable. They are uniquely diverse. It is understandable that many collisions occur without intent. However, it is mortifying that the term 'accident' is acceptable in this day and age as the standard term for all collisions, including cases in which the driver speeds off, fully aware of the extent of damage he or she has caused.

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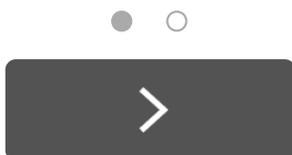
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In remembrance of road crash victims, I call upon brethren and countrymen to adopt the use of appropriate terminology that neither demeans the devastation caused by crashes nor excuse any culpable behaviour by any road user. Rather, embrace terminology that does not contribute to the discrimination against road crash victims but instead promotes accountability and an evidence-based approach.

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To Members of Parliament, members of the press, law enforcement, health professionals, the emergency services and all others, I call on you to support the Traffic (Amendment) Bill 2014 soon to be tabled in Parliament. This legislation actively seeks to protect children as vulnerable road users. It must be passed for our children's protection.

And because I couldn't agree with him any more, I conclude with the profound remarks of Dr Kevin Watkins, "Death and injury on the world's roads is arguably the single most neglected human development challenge. The vocabulary of the road traffic injury epidemic helps to explain the neglect. While child deaths from, say malaria, are viewed as avoidable tragedies that can be stopped through government action, road traffic deaths and injuries are widely perceived as 'accidents'—unpredictable events happening on a random basis to people who have the misfortune to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

The time to act is now. Let's join together to save Kenya's children.

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