news
NHTSA

ODI: The Consumer's Friend

Robert Hellmuth, Acting Chief, Defects Evaluation Division, discusses defective component with Jack Lilley, Equipment Group Leader (left), and Jack Dunsmoor, Vehicle Group Leader.

William Risteen, Acting Chief, Engineering Analysis Division, demonstrates computerized defect information system to staff members George Chiang (left) and Gary Woodford.

Harry Rowe, Acting Chief, Defects Information Systems Staff, discusses availability of defect information with a consumer.

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Editor M. J. Noll

March 1978

The Office of Defects Investigation has long been an active force in helping to insure that cars on the road are made safely. ODI, formerly a part of MVP, is now a major component of NHTSA's new Office of Enforcement. Their specific objective is to help prevent vehicle related accidents through enforcement of the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966, as amended.

To meet this objective, ODI must quickly identify possible safety defects in vehicles and then insures that appropriate corrective action is taken. The "corrective action" nearly always involves a recall--either voluntarily by the manufacturer or through

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Consumer's Friend (from page 1)

ODI prompting, when an investigation indicates the need.

Since the beginning of the Act in September 1966, there have been over 2,396 recall campaigns involving 65.7 million vehicles. Although a manufacturer may recall a large number of vehicles to find the defective ones, most campaigns require correction of 100% of the vehicles involved. ODI estimates that 80 to 90% of all vehicles recalled require correction. These recalls could be the result of faulty design or inadequate quality control. Since 1966, design problems have led to one-third of the campaigns involving two-thirds of the vehicles. Faulty quality control has triggered two-thirds of the campaigns, but involved only one-third of the vehicles.

Just what is a defect? A safety related defect is a flaw in material,

Leamon Strickland (standing) and William Studebaker, both with the Defects Evaluation Division, review investigation report.

manufacture, workmanship, design or performance that results in the possibility of an unreasonable risk of accident, injury, or death whether the vehicle is in operation or not.

Under the 1966 Act, if a manufacturer determines that a defect exists or that a vehicle does not comply with an applicable Federal motor vehicle safety standard, he shall notify the Secretary and owners, purchasers and dealers and then shall remedy the defect or failure.

The defect notification must contain a clear expression of the defect, explain how the owner can obtain correction and describe what could happen if the defect is not corrected. It must state that the defect will be corrected without charge and specify the earliest date it will be corrected. It must also state the procedure for notification of the Administrator when the defect is not properly remedied.

There are three ways in which a defect notification is initiated: voluntary action on the part of the manufacturer, or through an order as a result of a compliance test failure, or as the result of a defect investigation. About 85% of all defect campaigns are voluntary on the part of the manufacturer without prior knowledge or contact from ODI, and about half of all vehicles recalled are the result of these voluntary campaigns.

Wolfgang Reinhart (sitting) and Jon White, Engineering Analysis, examine broken Ford flex fan.

Increased activity on the part of ODI in 1977 recalled a record 12.9 million vehicles. Ten million of these vehicles were directly attributed to the ODI effort.

There are approximately 38 persons in the Office of Defects Investigation, with 28 doing investigative work.

The Office is divided into three basic divisions: The Defects Information Systems Staff, the Engineering Analysis Division, and the Defects Evaluation Division.

The Defects Information Systems Staff has the task of processing information and analyzing data for trends to assist in the timely identification of alleged safety related defects in vehicles and vehicle equipment. They sort, code and evaluate some 3,000 consumer complaints that come into the Administration each month for possible trends in safety-related defects. These complaints along with data from the Hotline are stored in a computer file. It is this data bank which supplies the raw data for engineering analysis.

The Engineering Analysis Division (EAD) defines the alleged defect to the extent necessary to determine whether a formal investigation is warranted. The analysis can include testing, records searches for similar complaints and related information, and the gathering of data from the involved vehicle or equipment manufacturer. The EAD also conducts the NHTSA Parts Return Program and other selected surveys to obtain early warning information on potential defects.

The Parts Return Program, an ongoing project for over six years, involves the voluntary submittal of failed automotive components by independent repair shops. By reviewing these parts, ODI is better able to identify the existence of potential safety-related defects in vehicles. There are about 2,000 shops across the nation currently enrolled in this program.

NHTSA is currently expanding this program to

Frances Johnson and Mary Little (front), Defects Information Systems Staff, prepare investigative case files.

include 700 automobile dealers, fleets, and parts suppliers, whose participation should provide more information on newer vehicles (i.e., those still under warranty).

Oftentimes, recalls are initiated by the involved manufacturer as a direct result of these engineering reviews. Additionally, the EAD monitors and reviews all of the recall campaigns being conducted by manufacturers. This includes the review of campaign procedures, as well as actual field inspection and audit of vehicles, to assure that campaigns are being conducted in accordance with the Act and NHTSA regulations.

The Defects Evaluation Division could concisely be described as the program managers of the formal investigations. The people working in this area determine the consequence of the defect previously identified by engineering analysis. This is accomplished by information requests to the manufacturer, owner interviews, testing and nationwide surveys. The results of their efforts are forwarded to Chief Counsel and provide the basis for an initial defect determination.

As part of NHTSA's recent reorganization, the Auto Safety Hotline was transferred from the Office of Public Affairs and Consumer Participation to ODI.

Not only does the Hotline provide a convenient

James Green and Albert Jimenez (standing), Defects Information Systems Staff, review defect report received from a vehicle manufacturer.

avenue by which the general public can obtain vehicle recall information and report vehicle problems, but it also serves as an early warning system of vehicle safety problems. Hotline operators handle 150-200 calls during the normal workday, but as many as 500 when a major recall or safety investigation is announced.

Because it keeps a vigilant lookout for auto-related defects, ODI is sometimes called the watchdog of national vehicle safety.

graffiti

Perfection is attained by slow degrees; she requires the hand of time.
— Voltaire

Personnel

Welcome Aboard

Mark F. Anderson, Highway Safety Management Specialist, NTS, 1-1.

'Bye and Good Luck

Robert M. Churella, Attorney Advisor, OCC, 1-13.

Charles A. Baker, Physical Scientist, NMV, 1-14.

Congrats on Promotion

Helen E. Jackson, Secretary, PACP, 11-20-77.

Thomas J. Coe, Program Analysis Officer, P&P, 1-1.

Mary Ann Carman, Contract Coordinator Assistant, NEF, 1-15.

Michael F. Smith, Engr. Research Psychologist, NRD, 1-15.

Janice Norman, Review and Evaluation Examiner, NTS, 2-26.

First Arrival

Congratulations to Kenneth Snowden and his wife, Paulette, on birth of their 7 pounds, 3 ounces son, Kristian Jamal. He was born on Tuesday, February 7, at 6:56 p.m. Mr. Snowden is an employee of the National Driver Register.

Thought Provoker

Consider the postage stamp. It secures success by sticking to one thing until it gets there.

Josh Billings

Fourteen Employees Receive Awards

Fourteen NHTSA employees have recently received awards for noteworthy contributions on the job.

Outstanding performance ratings were given to Frank Berndt, OCC; Alex Lawrence, AD; Thomas F. MacLaughlin, Virginia Willis, NRM; Georgia Monkman, JoAnn Murianka, Harold R. Shankle, NRD; and Nancy Symons, Region VI.

Receiving Special Achievement Awards were Ruth A. Aparicio, NRM; Thomas N. Hauser, Region V; and Richard Lorr, OCC.

Quality Step Increases were awarded to Sally A. DeCuzzi, NEF; Alex Lawrence, AD; and William G. Studebaker, NMV.

Driver Named NTSB Member

Congratulations and best wishes to Elwood T. (Woody) Driver, who has been nominated as a Member of the National Transportation Safety Board.

Mr. Driver joined NHTSA shortly after its inception in 1967 and has ably served the agency in many key assignments. Initially, he headed a division concerned with motor vehicle-in-use standards. In 1971, he became Director of the Office of Crash Avoidance, MVP, and recently was named Acting Associate Administrator for Rulemaking.

All in NHTSA wish Woody well on his new assignment, and will surely miss him.

Job Openings

For complete details on these job openings, see the official vacancy announcements. Vacancy announcements are posted on the NHTSA Bulletin Boards at both the Nassif and Transpoint Buildings. They are also distributed to each Office Director.

Safety Defects Information Assistant, GS-301-7, NEF (ODI). Opens: 2-14, Closes: 3-7. NHTSA 78-32.

Secretary (Stenography), GS-319-06, OCR. Opens: 2-15, Closes: 3-08. NHTSA 78-33.

Public Information Specialist, GS-1081-9, PACP. Opens: 2-24, Closes: 3-16. NHTSA 78-34.

Accounting Technician, GS-525-4/5, AD. Opens: 3-1, Closes: 3-21. NHTSA 78-35.

New Publication

Each year some 3,000 motorcyclists are killed and over 350,000 injured on our highways. Can motorcycle helmets help cut these horrendous statistics?

"Yes!" the pamphlet titled "Motorcycle Helmets: Claims and Facts" points out. It then clearly states the reasons why.

The pamphlet was written by Bernie Ames of PACP in cooperation with Lew Buchanan, TSP.

Single copies can be obtained from the Distribution Office, Room 4423.