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Tekst 10

BLUE IS FOR DANGER



A startling rise in police crashes raises doubts about the risk factor in emergency driving, reports **Simon Potter**

1 **T**hey're loud, highly visible, in a hurry and in your rear-view mirror. They could be police chasing a suspect, paramedics on a life-or-death emergency or firefighters — strikes permitting — racing to a blaze. Three groups united in their need to waste no time. So you try to give them room and trust that they know what they're doing.

2 The police are the most frequent users of the blue-light privilege. But according to Fred Harrison, a Kent police driving instructor: "Blue lights merely serve to say, 'Here I am, please let me through'."

3 All Kent police recruits receive a week's basic driver training after about seven months in the job, including the use of lights and sirens. After the course they are free to drive standard panda cars as part of their duty. They can also "follow" suspect cars, but they cannot "pursue" them — that's the job of officers with more experience and specific training in the skills of pursuit driving.

4 However, something is going horribly wrong, because a record number of people are losing their lives as a result of police pursuits. In 1997-98 the Police Complaints Authority (PCA) dealt with nine deaths from police chases. In 2001-02 there were 44.

5 Police methods of communication, training and risk assessment were all found wanting in a PCA report published in July. David Best, the PCA's head of research, found that officers were engaging in too many pursuits or follows that endangered the public. "There is inadequate risk assessment in many pursuits, resulting in inappropriate decisions taken by

police drivers," he says. "Their discretion to pursue or follow should be reduced and central management of incidents needs to be increased."

6 Little research has been done on pursuit driving safety but a 1997 Home Office study of more than 700 serious injury accidents involving police vehicles found that more than 15% of pursuits were by drivers not trained to the correct level.

7 As well as ambulances and fire engines, others with blue-light privileges include bomb disposal crews, various Ministry of Defence personnel, coastguards and doctors. But there are no standards on how much training they receive before being let loose on "blues and twos".

8 The most worrying area is private ambulance operators. Bob Jackson, chairman of the Blue Light Users' Conference, says: "There's no formal ambulance driving qualification; the law requires only that you hold a licence for the category of vehicle that you're driving."

9 "Driver training is very expensive, and since private ambulance firms operate to make a profit it's easy to understand why some don't want to spend money on training if they don't have to."

10 The Driving Standards Agency has begun to examine a set of minimum training standards for blue-light users, and Jackson says a way must be found of managing that system on a national basis. "It's vital that any training to achieve that standard is carried out by people with the right experience and qualifications."

11 Ben Heatley, of the road safety campaign group Brake, says emergency service journeys are made in highly stressful circumstances. "It's essential that anyone who drives on behalf of the fire brigade, police or ambulance service receives extensive training," he says. "Part of this training should be informing drivers that they should never risk causing a crash in order to get to an emergency quickly."

EMERGENCY DRIVING ESSENTIAL FACTS

Police drivers have exemptions from road traffic regulations, including observing red lights and speed limits, but they can be prosecuted for dangerous or careless driving

Blue light drivers cannot ignore red lights; they must give way to traffic going through on green

If a police car crashes and it is thought there is blame on the officer's part, the decision on legal action rests with the Crown

Prosecution Service, though the case will be sent to a non-local branch to ensure impartiality

Norfolk police sergeant Stephen Askew was convicted of careless driving and fined £500 after being involved in a fatal crash while answering a 999 call

A police officer in Sussex was fined £100 for driving without due care and attention after he seriously injured a boy aged eight on a pedestrian crossing

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■ Tekst 10 Blue is for danger

“A startling rise in police crashes” (ondertitel)

- 1p 41 Gaat het artikel in op de oorzaken van de vele aanrijdingen tijdens achtervolgingen? Zo nee, antwoord “Nee”. Zo ja, vanaf welke alinea? Noteer het nummer van deze alinea.