

February 22, 2001

## **World-renowned Risk Expert Visits Whitehorse**

Dr. Gerald J. S. Wilde, an international specialist on safety and risk management, will be visiting Whitehorse on February 26 and 27. On both days, Wilde will be holding public information sessions between 9 and 11 am at the High Country Inn. The first session will focus on risk "theory and evidence" and the second on "applications to safety and health."

Wilde is best known for his book *Target Risk* in which he puts forward the theory of risk homeostasis. According to the theory, individuals develop a personal target of how much risk they find acceptable—similar to the set point on a furnace thermostat. A person's behavior will tend to maintain risk exposure at or about that target level.

Wilde proposes that as we perceive our risk becoming smaller, we increase our unsafe behavior. Installing safety equipment may lower our perceived risk of injury and therefore increase our risky behaviour—to a point where accident levels remain the same or in some cases, increase.

Some examples: In a German study, installing anti-lock brakes failed to lower the accident rate in a fleet of taxis. A follow-up study showed that the vehicle operators drove both faster and more recklessly after the anti-lock brakes were installed, due to a perceived lower accident risk. An American study reported that "air-bag equipped cars tend to be driven more aggressively and that aggressiveness appears to offset the effect of the air bag for the driver and increases the risk of death of others" (Peterson, Hoffer and Millner, 1995).

According to Wilde's work, many safety campaigns and policies simply move accidents around rather than reducing them. This is because these promotions fail to motivate people to reduce the level of risk they are willing to accept.

"The motivation to be safe can be effectively enhanced by incentive systems which reward people for safe behaviour and having no accident," says Wilde. "Well-designed incentive programs are capable of bringing about major and lasting reductions in the accident rates and show very favourable benefit/cost ratios."

Anyone involved in work or recreational pursuits that involve risk will find Wilde's research compelling. He has lectured to a wide range of groups including the National Outdoor Leadership School (USA), the Canadian Avalanche Association (Canada), the Industrial Foundation for Accident Prevention (Australia) and the Latin American Congress of Traffic Accidents and Medicine (Brazil). His findings are of interest to people involved in traffic safety; wilderness safety; media communications for safety and health; drafting public policy; and educating in public health and safety.

Wilde is a **Professor of Psychology in the Department of Psychology** at Queens University in Kingston, Ontario. His book, *Target Risk*, is published on the internet at [pavlov.psyc.queensu.ca/target/](http://pavlov.psyc.queensu.ca/target/)

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