

Crashed cars may soon be able to dial 999 for help

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ALL new cars in Europe could soon be able to make potentially lifesaving emergency phone calls if they are involved in a serious crash, the European Commission has said.

The necessary technology should be in place to make such a device a reality across the continent by 2009.

"With this technology, your car could save your life," said Viviane Reding, the EU's information, society and media commissioner. "Advanced information and communication technologies have great potential to improve road safety in Europe."

Only last week, the European Commission heralded the availability within six months of anti-crash radar to detect imminent collisions and apply the brakes.

Now, if that fails and a crash occurs, the car itself will be able to ring for help using "eCall" - automatic emergency dialling.

"Like anti-crash radar, eCall is an area where EU-wide consensus can help remove technological and commercial barriers to the take-up of lifesaving road safety systems in Europe," Ms Reding said.

However, motoring organisations in Britain said that while they welcomed the eCall system, it was important that the emergency services themselves had the resources to respond effectively.

In the event of a crash, e-call technology will dial the emergency services at a "Public Service Answering Point", and report the vehicle's exact location. The system, which will use a new Europe-wide emergency number of 112, can also be triggered by someone inside the car.

The prediction is that eCall will cut emergency response times significantly and save up to 2,000 lives each year.

Neil Greig, the head of policy at the AA motoring trust in Scotland, said: "The AA has been working on this proposal for a number of years. The major problem is over who answers the emergency call.

"In Scotland the police are trying to reduce 999 calls. I know from discussing this with the police they don't want to be swamped with calls. The ambulance service is also prioritising calls.

"The key thing is that if anyone buys a car with this system then they shouldn't have to pay for help. The good point is that the motorist will know that help is on its way."

More than 40,000 people are killed or seriously injured on Britain's roads each year.

Max Mosley, the president of the FIA, motorsport's international governing body, said recently that huge advances in technology from Formula One could be employed in family cars if governments and car manufacturers were willing.

Developments include electronic skid protection and an electronic system designed to change the vehicle's internal structure to reduce impact.

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