

# As cars get smart, roads become safer

By ANNA McLAUHLIN

THE car of the future will warn you when there is an accident ahead. It will stop you from breaking the speed limit, wake you up if you fall asleep or alert you if you accidentally wander into another lane on the motorway.

In fact, some of this potentially life-saving technology is already available, or will be in the next few years, but motorist associations are worried that lack of consumer information and political input is hindering take-up.

This was one of the conclusions of the annual conference held by the European Commission's eSafety Forum last week (2 June) in Hannover, Germany.

The forum was set up by the European Commission in 2003 to try to speed up the development of 'Intelligent Transport Systems' (ITS), which use communication technology to increase road safety.

In Hannover, members agreed that the focus should now shift away from technology and towards ensuring that people know about it and want to buy it.

"We have developed the technology but we need to deploy it and the consumer has to be involved," says Jacob Bangsgaard, head of international co-operation at Ertico, a public/private partnership aiming to develop the ITS market. "We have to explain to them how it works and how it can help them."

According to Ertico, by 2007, available technology will include braking systems that can mitigate a crash and electronic programmes to prevent lane wandering. 2009 will see the introduction of 'drowsy driver detection' and by 2012, vehicle-to-vehicle communication will allow advanced cruise control that automatically adjusts a car's speed by detecting the speed and distance of the car in front.

But these technologies may never be taken up if more is not done to promote them, argues Johan Grill from the Fédération Internationale de L'Automobile and chairman of the eSafety Forum's User Outreach working group.

Communication needs to be stepped up in the first instance, he says, pointing to the stabilising technology known as ESP (Electronic Stability Program). ESP uses technology to readjust the brake effect of wheels independently of the driver to ensure that a car does not overturn if a bend is taken too quickly.

The technology enjoyed great publicity after Mercedes announced it would implement it in all its passenger cars, having suffered embarrassment when consumer tests showed that the Mercedes A-class model could easily tip over.

"Simple test results show the consumer how they will be safer, without bombarding them with technical explanations," says Grill.

Tax incentives could also be used to improve consumer take-up of safety features, he argues, although these are notoriously difficult to implement at EU level as they require unanimity from national governments.

"We know from environmental

technology that tax incentives are a very efficient way of bringing new systems to the market," he says.

On Monday (13 June), MEPs will vote on a report by centre-right MEP Ari Vatanen on the Commission's Road Safety Action Programme. Vatanen also calls on the Commission to implement "fiscal and other incentives to accelerate the introduction of effective solutions" because "new car buyers are not always able or willing to pay the full cost".

The Commission is poised to adopt recommendations for tax incentives for carbon dioxide emissions from cars, but as yet there is no move to extend this to car safety.

Another major hindrance to the take-up of ITS is investment from member states. Whereas ESP



The BMW M6: modern cars are bursting with safety equipment

is a self-contained technology, other initiatives require the development of further infrastructure to be made available. Some 43 authorities and associations across the EU have

committed to develop a system that allows cars, in the case of a collision, to call emergency services automatically, by 2009. The in-car technology for the system – known as eCall – has been developed, but it is taking time for member states to invest in the necessary infrastructure and services to respond to the calls.

So far Finland is the only state that has committed to implementing eCall by 2009. "Sweden, the Netherlands and the UK are about to sign up but it takes time and every month we wait there are more deaths on EU roads," says Bangsgaard.

eCall is expected to cut the average response time to accidents by up to 50% in rural areas and 40% in urban areas, thereby saving as many as 2,500 lives every year across the EU.

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