

SIDE AIRBAG OOP INJURY TECHNICAL WORKING GROUP
A JOINT PROJECT OF AAM, AIAM, AORC, AND IIHS

August 8, 2000

The Honorable Rosalyn G. Millman
Acting Administrator
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
400 Seventh Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20590

Dear Ms. Millman:

Enclosed is a document entitled, "*Recommended Procedures for Evaluating Occupant Injury Risk from Deploying Side Airbags.*" This document reflects the work of the Side Airbag Out-Of-Position Injury Technical Working Group, an effort sponsored jointly by the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, the Association of International Automobile Manufacturers, the Automotive Occupant Restraints Council, and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

May 21, 1999 letters from Dr. Ricardo Martinez, the former administrator of NHTSA, to the Alliance and to the AIAM, precipitated this effort. In those letters, Dr. Martinez requested that the two organizations

"...work together to provide NHTSA, within 45 days, a specific industry-led plan to develop test procedures for assessing side and head-protection air bag safety, with particular attention to out-of-position occupants. We believe there should be three guiding principles for this effort: the test procedures must be comprehensive, the process must be open and inclusive (transparent), and the final product must be completed on a timely basis. The test procedures need to be comprehensive to assure the public that these systems do not pose the risk of serious injury to in- or out-of-position occupants. The process for development of these test procedures must be transparent, providing a full participation opportunity for consumers, governments, and other relevant groups and individuals. Finally, this effort needs to be timely; it needs to be concluded expeditiously so that these procedures can rapidly affect technological developments in this area. With this in mind, this effort should be completed by the end of 1999."

As Chairman of the Technical Working Group (TWG), I am pleased to forward to you this document, which represents a good faith effort to fulfill Dr. Martinez's request. The TWG has recommended a panorama of test procedures and injury criteria that assure that side airbags in vehicles will be fully appropriate for family transportation. The automobile manufacturers and their suppliers are committed to developing new side airbag systems according to these guidelines, and they are already assessing the performance of side airbag systems in light of the new guidelines. I hasten to add, however, that these activities should not be construed to imply that current side airbag designs are dangerous to OOP occupants – indeed, the on-road experience with side airbags, as documented by NHTSA's Special Crash Investigations, has been very positive. The purpose of the recommended guidelines is to assure that this experience continues to be positive, by incorporating the best information available about the *potential* risks from side airbags.



For the most part, this document speaks for itself. However, two issues require further comment. On June 1, 2000, we invited a number of outside individuals and groups, including other experts in injury biomechanics, child restraint manufacturers, and consumer-advocacy groups to comment on a final draft of these recommended procedures. We also invited them to attend a meeting on June 22, 2000, when the members of the TWG would make themselves available to discuss any comments or questions in greater detail. Most of the comments were supportive of the TWG's efforts, but some resulted in changes to the draft document. The TWG is very grateful for the participation of these commenters. Summaries of the comments and the TWG responses are contained in a memorandum being sent to the invited participants (copy enclosed).

Two of the consumer advocacy groups raised a particular concern that the TWG did not resolve. Specifically, Consumers Union and Parents for Safer Airbags did not attend the meeting on June 22, on the grounds that it was not a fully "public" meeting, open to the news media and the general public. However, the TWG does not have the role of holding a public meeting in the sense requested by these groups. We have neither the resources nor the communications mechanisms which are available to the federal government and which make such meetings feasible.

In keeping with Dr. Martinez's request that the activities of the automakers be open and inclusive, the TWG did solicit comments from other groups and individuals likely to have viewpoints that could inform the final product. However, as stated in the document, the TWG construed its proper mission as a technical one: To review available dummies, injury criteria, and test procedures in an effort to develop technically effective and feasible measures for assessing the risk of side airbags to out of position occupants. In completing that mission, we included on the TWG some of the foremost experts on the biomechanics of crash injury, representatives of each of the automakers and airbag supplier companies, as well as representatives from Transport Canada and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, which have expertise in side impact injury prevention and testing. We are confident, based on our working group membership and on the feedback of those from whom we received comments, that the recommended procedures represent the best technical information at this time. A public meeting in the sense requested by these two commenters would not improve the document and would delay the finalization of procedures that will help assure that side airbags are as safe as possible under all conditions.

Nevertheless, the TWG is sensitive to the concerns expressed by Consumers Union and Parents for Safer Airbags, which indicate some pressure for a public meeting. Therefore, we support NHTSA holding such a public meeting at the earliest feasible time. We note that the agency is engaged at this time in its own assessment of the recommended test procedures and other side impact testing as well. When that program begins to bear some fruit, a public meeting would be useful to discuss those results, how they relate to the TWG's recommended procedures, and whether real world experience continues to indicate the appropriateness of the recommended procedures. In that regard, I wish to call your attention to the fact that the TWG does not view our final recommendations as a finished work but rather a work in progress. The members have recommended that the sponsoring organizations reconvene the TWG no later than a year from now to review new information that might affect the recommendations. At that time, we would consider any information that NHTSA might have developed or that might be forthcoming at a public meeting held by the agency.

Another issue raised by commenters also could not be addressed directly by the TWG, namely the issue of how to communicate to consumers whether and when a particular vehicle model has side airbags that are consistent with the recommendations. Parents for Safer Airbags had a specific suggestion that an "Express Warranty" be included in the owner's manual of each vehicle with side airbags that conform to the recommended OOP occupant testing procedures (see Summary of Invited Comments). The TWG decided it did not have the expertise to consider the merits or ramifications of that suggestion, but all

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members of the TWG received a copy, as requested by Parents for Safer Airbags. As many of the TWG members are representatives of automakers, and AAM and AIAM are sponsors of the TWG, this suggestion will be available for consideration by automakers as they address the issue of customer information.

As indicated above, the TWG intends to reconvene next year. In the meantime, if NHTSA has further questions about the recommendations or would like to discuss future steps in more detail, I would be happy to try to arrange that with the other working group members.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Adrian K. Lund". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Adrian K. Lund, Ph.D.
Chairman, Side Airbag OOP Injury Technical Working Group

Enclosures