

MORTALITY STATISTICS (Originally published July 1967)

One of our pet peeves is the prediction and box score tabulation of expected highway fatalities kept for us each holiday weekend by the news media.

"450 Expected to Die this Weekend," say the headlines. "New Records Expected in Holiday Deaths," we are told by the commentators. These solemn predictions are made religiously two to three days before every holiday binge.

Recently, on Memorial Day, we heard the sober announcement that "Holiday deaths are falling far below what we had predicted." This observation was delivered by a commentator in the same tone of disappointment as that used to reprimand us that only 30% of the qualified voters had turned out to exercise their voting privilege in an election.

It is deplorable when not enough of us are killed on the highways or by drowning to confirm the predictions of the polltakers and statisticians. It is almost un-American. If we are not careful, we may find that we rank 8th or 9th behind some other countries in mortality statistics from accidental death.

Of course, accidental deaths are well down the list on our mortality statistics tables. Heart disease accounted for 38.9% of our mortalities in the latest tables, cancer for 16.1%, strokes and CNS vascular lesions for 11.0%; and then came accidental death at 5.8% with infections, 3.3% and suicide, 1.2% trailing.

But take heart. Do you know what the leading cause of death is in this country:

Between the ages 1 – 4 years? Accident 28%

Between 4 – 15? Accident 35%

Between 15 – 44? Accident 27%.

Now if you can just make it to the age of 45 or over, you will stand at least a 30% chance (if you die, that is) of having heart disease take you off. This will entitle you to complain about the sad state of American medicine because we have the highest mortality from heart disease of all the 23 countries listed in the vital statistics reports. Only those backward countries, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, have a heart disease mortality rate that comes within a percentage point or two of ours.

On the other hand, if you prefer to die with cancer, you are in the wrong country. Only 16.1% of our deaths are due to malignancy, and at least sixteen other countries have higher rates than that, including those socially enlightened ones that guarantee medical care, such as Denmark (22.4%), Sweden (19.1%), Netherlands (23.7%) and England (19.6%). And if you would like to die of tuberculosis or some other infectious disease, you had better stay away from this country and Switzerland altogether.

What it all boils down to is that mortality statistics are interesting. They may be kept in proper perspective only by remembering the important one: the mortality rate for living remains fixed at 100%.