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Steering Clear of Drunk Drivers

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FORT LAUDERDALE, Florida -- If the car doesn't start, you are too drunk to drive. That is the premise behind a \$600 sensor that can be installed in a steering wheel or in gloves and will test a driver's skin to determine alcohol consumption.

Inventor Dennis Bellehumeur, 54, says his device prevents a vehicle from starting or running if the driver is over the legal alcohol limit.

The device's skin sensor makes it different from the "breath alcohol ignition interlock" that has been on the market for three decades. That device requires that a driver blow into an instrument that measures alcohol in the breath.

Bellehumeur, a real estate agent and deli owner in Wilton Manors, spent 12 years developing his sensor after his then-teenage son crashed into a utility pole while driving drunk and suffered minor brain damage.

"Thank God no one was killed. It was a real wake-up call. I wanted to do something," Bellehumeur said. "I hope one day I'll get a call from some guy saying 'I was drunk and could've killed someone, but because of you, I couldn't start my car'."

He received a patent this month and the sensor should complete testing this year, he said.

He would like it to become a standard feature on new vehicles, but James Frank, a research psychologist for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, said that may be difficult.

"I'm not sure the auto industry is prepared to accept that for cost reasons," he said. "Neither will the driving public because the majority of them don't drink and drive. We're not there yet."

Drunken driving killed an estimated 16,654 people last year, nearly 40 percent of the nation's total traffic deaths, according to agency projections released in April.

Rants & Raves

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