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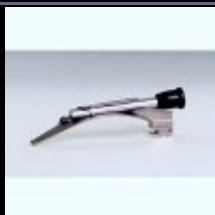
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Whistle While You Drive: Preventing Ambulance and Deer Collisions

By Christopher Cussat

March 2006, MERGINET A few weeks ago, my girlfriend and I drove across Pennsylvania to attend a funeral in my hometown. I usually take a secondary, two-lane, rural road for the first two hours, which then connects to the interstate for the rest of the trip. It was already icy and beginning to snow when we left that evening.

About an hour into the drive, a medium-sized deer walked right in the middle of our lane. I tensed up and hit the brakes pretty hard, trying to keep the bad road conditions in mind. Luckily, I did not slide and there were no cars behind me or coming from the opposite direction. We spooked the deer, but she allowed us to pass her in the oncoming lane before jumping into the woods. It was a scary moment.

Imagine how much scarier this scenario is for EMTs in an ambulance, especially with a patient on board. Deer collisions cause thousands of injuries and deaths on our roads, and it has been estimated that there are about 1 million deer-related vehicle accidents in the U.S. each year. The consequences of such accidents multiply when ambulance patients are added to the equation. Yet ambulance collisions involving deer happen much too frequently, particularly for EMTs in rural regions.

LifeNet Inc. knew this fact all too well. As an ALS EMS and Aero-medical



The Controversy: Do Deer Whistles Work?

No currently published research verifies the effectiveness of deer whistles. In fact, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety has



agency that serves northeast Texas and southwest Arkansas, LifeNet operates 23 ambulances which service very rural areas. For a few years, they had been plagued with a rash of deer collisions, many of which led to some of their vehicles being put out of service. In addition to costing money and time, these accidents (more importantly) negatively affected the service and safety they provided to their patients.

Something had to be done to address this problem. Darryl Coontz, director of operations at LifeNet, believed that the only solution was to prevent the accidents. His first approach was to talk to employees and drivers who had been in deer-related collisions. Through discussions, they tried to determine how to avoid deer, be more cautious and drive evasively. Despite their good efforts, this strategy failed and their ambulances still continued to hit deer. Coontz explained, "When you hit a deer, there's nothing you can really do; they jump out in front of you and it's usually at night."

In reaction to this, Coontz came up with the idea to put deer whistles on their ambulances. "Something in the back of my mind remembered that there was a thing called a deer whistle; I also remembered the controversy that they didn't work, but I still thought, 'Why not? Let's try it.'"

Deer whistles are inch-long, bullet-shaped cylinders that are easily mounted on the front bumper of a vehicle. As the vehicle reaches a speed above 30 miles per hour, air rushing through the cylinder emits an ultrasonic signal (imperceptible to humans) up to a quarter mile away and supposedly stops deer and other animals in their tracks.

Not everyone was whistling Coontz's tune at first. "There was great skepticism within the company; it was me against everybody, but I finally got my own way," he said.

Coontz later admitted that he was also a little skeptical. "The funny thing is that there's all sorts of evidence against using deer whistles." (See sidebar)

But eventually, LifeNet decided that they had nothing to lose in trying the products on their ambulance fleet. It also helped that deer whistles are relatively inexpensive, especially when compared to the costs associated with vehicle damage and loss of time or service.

The results of the experiment are impressive. Before using the devices, LifeNet drivers were averaging one deer collision a month. Since the installation of the deer whistles and up until the writing of this article, they have not had one. In fact, LifeNet ambulances have driven 512 days and more than 1.2 million miles without a deer strike.

Coontz concluded, "I really can't explain it because all of the evidence says

presented evidence against the device's effectiveness:

"Georgia's Game and Fish Department found that in hundreds of observations from vehicles equipped with deer whistles, deer didn't respond. According to wildlife biologists at the University of Georgia, neither deer nor humans can hear ultrasonic sound."

A University of Wisconsin study found that some whistles did produce low-pitched and ultrasonic sounds at speeds of 30 to 70 miles per hour; however, their researchers were unable to verify that deer responded to the sounds.

In conclusion, although no evidence can absolutely prove deer whistles work, it appears that no one has absolutely proven that they do not.

that these things don't work. But I swear, we put them on our ambulances and we haven't hit a deer—as far as I'm concerned, that speaks for itself."

For more information about LifeNet Inc., visit www.lifenetems.org.



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