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Correspondents are urged to write briefly so that readers may be offered as wide a selection of letters as possible. So many are being received that the omission of some is inevitable. Letters should be signed personally by all their authors.

An unnecessary risk to children

SIR,—In your leading article (24 January, p 180) you comment on injuries and deaths occurring to children under the age of 15 travelling in the front seat of cars and light vans. Your data indicate that only 8% of the children who were riding in that place and were killed had been wearing seat belts and that only 8% of the children who were riding in that place and were injured had been wearing seat belts. Unfortunately, as the data presented did not indicate the prevalence of seat-belt usage for children who are neither killed nor injured, effectiveness cannot be calculated. That prevalence for the United States is about 7%.

Generally speaking, studies of seat-belt usage have shown an exponential decrease with severity of injury. Campbell¹ showed that, whereas 27% of non-accident drivers wore seat belts, only 10% of accident drivers wore seat belts and that the proportion of seat-belt usage went down with severity of injury (11% for property damage accidents,

7% for injury accidents, and 1% for fatal accidents). These data are typical of the studies of seat-belt effectiveness.

Recently a well-done study has been released that looked at the question of safety of children passengers by seat location and use of restraint. Williams and Zador² studied the use of seat belts for children passengers of 1967 model or later automobiles involved in reported crashes in North Carolina in 1973 and 1974 with respect to injury. Of the nearly 27 000 children passengers involved in these crashes, nearly half were in the front seat. Nine per cent of those in the front seat were wearing seat belts and 6% of those in the back seat were doing so. From the accompanying table, it can be seen that unrestrained children in the front seat are at greatest risk of injury. Use of the seat belt or other restraint was associated with a 39% reduction in risk for front-seat children and a 31% reduction in risk for back-seat children. Further, it can be shown that for children

who were restrained the risk was reduced by 18% by riding in the back seat and by 28% for unrestrained children.

The advantage for child safety of being restrained is evident, as is the advantage of riding in the back seat. The European Conference of Ministers of Transport³ has recommended that children "be carried at the rear if they are too young or too small to use seat belts fitted to the vehicle, or if there are no special safety devices for them." In summary, it is safer for children to be restrained in vehicles and, particularly if unrestrained, it is safer for children to be in the back seat.

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¹ Campbell, B J, *Seatbelt Use among Drivers in Accidents and Drivers in the Population at Risk*. Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center, 1969.

² Williams, A F, and Zador, P, *Injuries to Children in Automobiles in Relation to Seating Location and Restraint Use*. Washington, DC, Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 1976.

³ Report by the Committee of Deputies Concerning the Problem of Young Children Carried in Front Seats of Motor Vehicles. Conference of European Minister of Transport, Paris, August 1975.

Sedatives for alcoholics

SIR,—Alcoholics, particularly those with predominantly psychogenic origin, often tend to use other drugs affecting the central nervous system to excess,¹ and chlormethiazole is no exception. As rightly stressed by Dr A R Foster (21 August, p 476), the recent trend among general practitioners of using chlormethiazole as a long-term "treatment for

	Front seat		Rear seat	
	Unrestrained	Restrained	Unrestrained	Restrained
No of children passengers in crash vehicles	11 804	1102 (8.6%)	13 221	844 (6.0%)
No injured	2125	121 (5.4%)	1719	76 (4.2%)
Percent injured	18	11	13	9
Percent reduction in injury risk with seat belts ..	39		31	