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**I am not a Fool; I hope
By: James L. Holly, MD**

If you follow this column each week, you expected to be reading the conclusion to SETMA's exercise prescription and an explanation of what it means. Exercise is one of the most important things you can do for your health. Next week, we'll continue that, but this week we will discuss another aspect of health, which is safety.

On October 10, 1966, almost thirty-eight years ago, I had an automobile accident. Another driver ran a red-light and destroyed my car. I was seriously injured but recovered completely. I learned a lesson from that incident: even though you have the "right of way," it doesn't mean that it will be given to you. Since that time, I have never approached a light which was green without observing the crossing traffic to make sure that others were heeding their red light. I learned from my accident. I was not a fool.

My present hope of not being a fool has to do with a more recent event. On Saturday, May 1, 2004, I was returning alone from my parents' home in Natchitoches, Louisiana. It was raining heavily and I was traveling too fast for the weather conditions on a long, straight stretch of road. At one point, I realized that I did not have traction on the road. I could only hope that I would regain that traction as there was nothing else I could do. If I hit the brakes, it wouldn't help and might hurt. If I tried to turn the steering wheel, it would only make matters worse. In a moment, and the instant is frozen in my memory and plays over and over in slow motion, my vehicle began to slide. The left rear began to "catch up" with the front of the truck. I was grateful that nothing was coming, for it there had been another vehicle; a collision would have been inevitable. At the worst point, my vehicle was sliding sideways down the road at seventy miles an hour.

At the speed I was traveling, the possibility that my vehicle would roll over was real. At that moment, I was grateful that I had my seat belt on. A year ago, I probably would not have. However, my friend, colleague and partner, Dr. Keith Stout, an outstanding emergency physician, had convinced me that seat belts were life savers. I had mine on, and it was a good thing, as I would not have had time to put it on.

Suddenly, however, my tires gained traction which was a good thing. Still, I was traveling fast and my front end was directed about 30 degrees off the center of the highway. I knew better than to try to correct that and the truck shot off the road. I knew

there were no obstacles at the side of the road, so that was not so bad. Perhaps all that I was going to get out of this was a good scare and a lot of mud. But, then I saw it. I had not noticed it before because it was there for only a short distance; it was a concrete ditch. To prevent erosion, a concrete ditch about ten-inches deep and twelve-inches wide with sides had been constructed along side the road about twenty feet from the highway. There was no way that I could miss it.

I knew the impact was going to be violent. I was still going fast and there was no time to brake. When I hit the ditch, I was braced, but more importantly my seat belt was securely fastened and tight. While the contents of my Denali went flying, I did not. The reading glasses in my shirt pocket flew out and landed on the floor, but I did not move, as I was secured by my seat belt. The initial impact was enormous. I was certain that the tires were blown out and that the front end was destroyed, but the truck continued through the ditch, out the other side, up an embankment which caused the vehicle to turn and it went back through the ditch and out the side next to the road.

By this time, I had regained control, as the vehicle had slowed significantly. Several things were obvious:

1. I was still alive.
2. I was unhurt
3. My vehicle was still moving
4. I now had control
5. I accelerated slightly and the vehicle responded.
6. All of the gauges were intact -- the oil pan was not destroyed
7. My brakes were barely working
8. Several things were rubbing against my tires
9. My cell phone was "out of range" with "no service"
10. It was raining very hard

One other thing was obvious, I felt really stupid, but it was too late to do anything about that. At a very slow speed, I drove into Leesville, Louisiana and found a front-end and brake shop which was open. I pulled into an open bay and asked a young man to access the damage to see if I could drive home. I called my wife. It turned out I was able to drive home.

The hope expressed in the title of this piece, as to hoping that I am not a fool derives from the Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament of the Bible. There are seven different Hebrew words which are translated "fool" in that book. While they have subtle differences of meaning, at the root all mean the same thing: a fool is one who cannot learn from his mistakes. The question is, will I learn from this experience? I love to travel but I hate taking time to do it. Typically, I allocate a certain amount of time for travel and then squeeze myself and my vehicle into that allocation. That is a mistake. The question is, "Will I stop doing that?"

I am grateful for several things about this incident:

- I am grateful that I was alone, although if I had not been, I would surely have driven differently.
- I am grateful to be alive, although there is no rational explanation for why I am. I do thank God for my safety and survival. I attribute to His Sovereign will that I did survive. I quickly acknowledge however that that bespeaks of no merit on my behalf, as I know many far more deserving of survival that have not. It shall remain a mystery in this life as to why some survive and others do not. For a believer, such as me, that mystery creates an awe, a worship of God, which results in praise and gratitude when we do survive and thanksgiving and acceptance in our hearts when those we love do not. In neither case is the merit nor lack of merit of the one involved an issue in whether they survive or not.
- I am grateful that my friend taught me that I should wear my seat belt. I shall become an evangelist for seat belts and I shall always wear mine, as shall anyone who is willing to ride with me in the future.
- I am grateful for a tire manufacturer who produced a product which could endure the abuse of that collision and still keep functioning.
- I am grateful for a vehicle which is constructed such that the passenger compartment is insulated as much as is possible from the force of that collision.
- I am also grateful for the stability of that vehicle so that it did not roll over.
- I am grateful for the two young men who helped me in Leesville, Louisiana.
- I am grateful for being home with my family and for having another opportunity for learning, which ultimately makes it possible for me not to be a fool.

It is sobering to face the possibility of death or serious injury, particularly when it is not for a noble purpose, but because of carelessness. At another time, I have asked the Lord to allow me to live to see my grandchildren's grandchildren, which will be my great, great grandchildren. To do that, I must live well into my late 90s. That means that I must eat right, exercise regularly, get appropriate check-ups, practice preventive medicine on myself, and above all, I must not be a fool. For all of the antioxidants and miles walked will avail nothing, if as a fool, I confront death again. Only time will tell if I am not, but it is my intent to learn from this experience of grace. We shall see.

As always, I conclude this piece the same as all others, except in this case, I personalize it, "after all, it is my life and it is my health."