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IN Malaysia, hardly a day goes by without a road crash being reported in the media, be it on television, radio, newspapers or the Internet. Recent police statistics put the total of road crashes reported last year at 548,598 — 1,503 crashes every day, 63 every hour and one every minute.

Road crashes are one of the top killers in the country, said Associate Professor Dr Kulanthayan K.C. Mani of the Department of Community Health in the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).

"Police figures showed the loss of 6,284 lives last year — 17 per day and two every three hours. Just ask, which disease in our country could kill 17 people a day, across all age groups, without fail for the past 30 years?"

"This has been the trend, losing 5,000 to 7,000 lives annually. Road crashes are preventable and, therefore, road users have a role in making our travels safe at all times," he said.

Kulanthayan, who is the executive director of Safe Kids Malaysia in UPM, is an ardent advocate of road safety.

Having been appointed to the board of directors of Swiss-based Global Alliance of Non-Governmental organisations for Road Safety during its general assembly in Chania, Greece, last month, it is Kulanthayan's mission to reduce road casualties not only in Malaysia, but across the world.

"Road safety is important not only in Malaysia, but also in other low- and middle-income countries. Road crashes are a 'disease' that need to be eradicated collectively," he said.

His Global Alliance appointment, Kulanthayan said, was a recognition for Safe Kids Malaysia.

"Global Alliance was set up in 2012 and registered in Geneva, Switzerland. Now, it boasts 225 member organisations in more than 90 countries.

"Our organisation, Safe Kids Malaysia Universiti Putra Malaysia, has joined Global Alliance in 2013.

"We have conducted road safety interventions and attended meetings in Morocco, Brazil, the United Kingdom, the United States, India and Greece."

He noted that the most significant part of his work was when members of Safe Kids Malaysia were chosen as the first batch of Global Alliance's road safety advocates in 2016.

They were sent to the US for a two-week training at the FedEx headquarters in Memphis, Tennessee. The following year, Safe Kids Malaysia was the first recipient of the FedEx International Road Safety Award.

Safe Kids Malaysia is part of Safe Kids Worldwide, an organisation dedicated to protect children from preventable injuries.

"We feel we can contribute to the Global Alliance vision of raising advocacy and building capacity and partnership. Through this appointment, I hope to contribute locally and globally," he said.

Kulanthayan said at present, Safe Kids Malaysia is working closely with the Malaysian Institute of Road Safety Research (Miros), the Road Transport Department, police, Health Ministry, Education Ministry and the Malaysian Civil Defence Force.

"We hope to build our local partners and, at the same time, scale up our global partners. This success model is what we would like to share with 225 member organisations from 90 countries," he said.

In his acceptance speech after being appointed to the Global Alliance board, Kulanthayan called for its members to work together to achieve a new target in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal. It was to halve the number of road casualties by 50 per cent by 2030.

"Together we can learn what works can be considered, adopted and adapted by each other. Peer countries must help each other," he said.

He highlighted the importance of continuously building capacity and encouraging students from



Associate Professor Dr Kulanthayan K.C. Mani (right) with other members of the Global Alliance board of directors appointed for a four-year term until 2023.

On a mission to keep roads safe

Global Alliance member countries to study road safety research in UPM.

"This is where UPM can contribute. We have the Master of Science (MSc) and PhD programmes in community health, and Occupational safety and health, at the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences. The Engineering Faculty is offering the MSc and PhD in transport and highway engineering.

"Road Safety is one of UPM's niche and we have been producing local and foreign graduates specialising in road safety for more than two decades.

"It is very important to build up the local capacity to champion road safety in every country," he said. Kulanthayan himself is a product of UPM.

"After completing my first degree, which was a BSc in Resource Economics in UPM in 1995, I was looking to further my studies.

"At that time, the MSc in Transport Planning had just been established in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor, and I wanted to explore something new. That was my beginning in the field of road safety."

After completing his masters in 1996, Kulanthayan was again exploring something new, which led him back to UPM to do his PhD under the late Professor Datuk Dr Radin Umar Radin Sohadi in the Engineering Faculty.

"He was looking for doctoral candidates in road safety because we had very few academicians trained in road safety then.

"Inspired by him, I enrolled as his first student to study a PhD in transport engineering. My research was on motorcycle safety helmets in Malaysia.



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ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR DR KULANTHAYAN K.C. MANI

Department of Community Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Putra Malaysia

Kulanthayan observed that the preventive strategies introduced by the government had borne fruit.

"If we look at road fatalities, it rose to an all time high of 7,152 in 2016. However, after that, the toll started falling to 6,740 in 2017, and again to 6,284 last year.

"The challenge is to maintain this trend of six to seven per cent decrease. If we continue this for the next two years, we will be able to achieve the target of reducing fatalities to 5,358 in the Malaysia Road Safety Plan 2014-2020, which is achievable if all stakeholders doubled their efforts to address the issue."

There are five quick wins in road safety, Kulanthayan said. They are promoting the use of public transport, especially rail-based transport; enforcing the law to curb speeding; wearing safety helmets for motorcyclists; fastening seat belts in front and at the back of vehicles; and, the use of child seats.

"Enforcement agencies have a big and important role to play. It can make a huge difference in saving lives.

"Countries that do well in road safety have invested heavily in law enforcement and rail-based public transport systems. Enforcement should be seen as part of education."

He said people should be thankful each time they get flagged down for violating traffic rules because it was meant to ensure their safety.

"We should view enforcement as part of education towards saving our lives," he said.