

Two kinds of driver cause road deaths

I was reminded this week what a bloody hypocrite I am.

We were up at the hospital, approaching lifts that go up in the new wing, and chose to ignore signs indicating two are for staff and one for us, the great unwashed.

We went for the first one that arrived, a staff one. As we entered, the door at the other end opened and medics charged in pushing a bed with a patient on it. “No, guys,” they yelled, with patience and no sign of malice. “Take the public lift, please.”

From then on, of course, I became Mr Diligent Correct Lift-User, scolding others who dared to do what we had done. Until one day a young woman visitor beamed and said: “Well, aren’t you a good boy” as she got into a staff lift. I was so staggered (and flattered) by the ironic reference to my absent youth, I was lost for words. Yeah, true.

Ignoring rules is in all of us, and never more obviously than on the roads. The results can be appalling - deaths, which as we’re constantly told were high last year, and other consequences that get less publicity but are almost equally bad, the injuries that can take years of recovery time.

Exceeding speed limits is an interesting phenomenon. Most drivers do it if they think the chances of getting a ticket are calculably slim. And then there are those who don’t. Worse, perhaps, they stay well under the limits, causing what can be an even deadlier problem – the buildup.

Buildups happen a lot at holidays, when those less experienced at long trips undertake gruelling journeys in overloaded vehicles. They hold others up. That leads to occasional craziness among the impatient, who risk passing when it’s not safe.

I have no idea whether that was the cause of a head-on crash in the Awakino Gorge at the end of December, but whatever it was led to two cars lying totalled on the road and a bunch of people in hospital.

It happened some time after 2pm, and hundreds of cars (including ours) were stopped either side of the crash site for a couple of hours while several ambulances, a helicopter, fire tenders and other vehicles and their crews cleaned up the mess.

There were no fatalities, so far as I know, but at least one person had that description applied to him or her that slides so easily off the tongue but may mean any number of awful things – critically injured. Only medics, family and friends will ever know details. The rest of us drivers won’t give it a thought.

How do I know? I don’t, really, but I can make an educated guess from what happened after the road was finally cleared around 5pm and we got on our way again. Everyone’s driving went right back to where it was prior to the prang – speed limits were exceeded, crazy passing happened, the road went back to being virtually empty as drivers in an even greater hurry than before vanished into clouds of their own dust.

One guy tail-gated a slower driver for many kilometres (remember, SH3 through there is notoriously shy of passing lanes) and then roared past a string, a manoeuvre that ran out of safe road and led him to continue on the wrong side as he whipped past the start of a yellow no-passing line. He got away with it.

We had all crawled past the accident scene, where two cars facing different directions had become one tangled wreck from which it was hard to imagine anyone emerging alive. Yet that grim sight seemed to have little effect on some people. They exhibited all the worst traits of the “I’m-a-great-driver-so-it-can’t-possibly-happen-to-me” syndrome, an idiot’s refuge from which there is often only one escape.

One other thing intrigued me. We spent a week in hell-hole Auckland (where parking for four hours costs \$52) and found life bearable only because there were no traffic jams.

On the way up, the road heading south was a constant traffic jam, so most Aucklanders had apparently fled. However, those few remaining - most of them driving SUVs they park a metre out from footpaths – were intent on tail-gating at every opportunity. Yet some of the same species of Auckland driver heading south exhibited the tentative build-up behaviour that leads to the consequences I described above. Ironic, or what.

Perhaps Aucklanders love jams so much they take them where-ever they go.