Out of the 1.2 million yearly global traffic deaths, more than 85% happen in developing countries, with a dangerous trend to double in number by 2020. The experience of highly motorised countries has shown that there are simple, cost-effective measures that can have an extraordinary and guaranteed impact on this health disaster. Such measures deal with problems like speeding and driving under the influence of alcohol, and low usage rates of seatbelts, child restraints, reflective clothing and motorcycle helmets. Additional measures focus on replacement of older, less-safe vehicles and upgrading poorly-designed and/or -maintained roads, while protecting vulnerable users -- all while working towards a more coordinated effort in terms of traffic legislation, political awareness and police enforcement.
On the other hand, reducing the remaining death toll in industrialised countries has been a painful experience, with a far longer learning curve than expected. Having halved that death toll is considered quite a success, both by governments and the automotive industry.

But there's a lot more to be done in our already highly motorised countries if we consider that roads and cars should be designed to minimise the consequences of a crash and the likelihood of a traffic-related fatality. Recent European Union research has found that for citizens under 45 years, the death rates from road crashes is more than six times higher than from cancer and 14 times higher than from coronary heart disease.

Now that Electronic Stability Control is being mandated in most highly-motorised countries, the next priority should be given to automatic braking, automatic cruise control, and lane change systems to give drivers advanced warnings and decrease the kinetic energy of vehicles in potentially dangerous driving situations. The new Volvo S60, Mercedes E-Class, and Audi A8 are showing the way for these innovative intelligent driver assistant systems. Because they are new and costly, we presently lack experience and data on the efficacy of these systems. It will be a major challenge to make them affordable for middle- and low-range cars.

Safer night driving is the other priority, with Advanced Front Light Systems automatically adjusting to road and weather conditions, Adaptive Driving Beam in the future, relying on IR or FIR Vision to take care of pedestrians or animals. Driver distraction will also have to be taken care of through Driver Attention Assist and Speed Limit Recognition systems.

All in all, keeping in mind the zero-death goal, the automotive Industry has and should continue to play a pivotal role in designing safer cars by promoting advanced technology in driver assistance and good lighting.