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Talented university student becomes latest 'stranded' smart motorway death - two others in comas



Zahid Ahmed, 19, was a talented and popular student at Middlesex University CREDIT: LINKEDIN

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A student was killed and two others left in comas after their university sports trip ended in tragedy when their vehicle broke down on a smart motorway, The Sunday Telegraph can reveal.

Zahid Ahmed, 19, died when the people carrier he was in came to a “stop” but did not reach an emergency refuge area before a lorry hit it. Four other Middlesex University students in the vehicle were hospitalised, a sixth suffered less severe injuries.

They were returning from a universities pool competition in Birmingham on the southbound M1 (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/08/31/smart-motorways-risk-life-says-widow-suing-highways-england/>) near Luton where the hard shoulder was opened to traffic.

A relative of one student who suffered brain injuries has said an investigation is needed to establish whether removing the hard shoulder and providing refuge areas roughly every mile puts stranded motorists at risk (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/08/23/smart-motorways-putting-lives-risk-former-roads-ministers-says/>).

Smart motorways use gantries to relay speed and closed lane messages CREDIT: JAMES FRASER/REX

A report submitted to the Bedfordshire and Luton Coroner’s Service says Zahid, whose family fled war-torn Afghanistan, died from “multiple traumatic injuries” when the vehicle “suffered mechanical failure on the M1 smart motorway”.

The report adds: “The vehicle was stationary with hazard light illuminated. A heavy good vehicle has then hit the rear ... causing significant damage.”

The teenager was identified by his student cards, and pronounced dead at the roadside on December 1.

The crash shocked Middlesex University (<https://www.mdx.ac.uk/>) in the run up to Christmas. James Kennedy, interim vice chancellor, issued a message to students saying he was “deeply saddened” by the “incredibly tragic” incident.

He explained how one student died, four others suffered “critical and serious injuries” and the sixth was released from hospital. It is understood one student in his 20’s who fell into a coma has since regained consciousness.

The university offered counselling to those struggling to cope with the tragedy.

Jim O'Sullivan, Highways England, boss told a select committee smart motorways with a hard shoulder only used at busy times are “too complicated for people to use” CREDIT: HIGHWAYS ENGLAND/PA

The Sunday Telegraph has revealed how motorists and passengers have been killed after becoming stranded in live lanes that used to be hard shoulders, in part because Highways England staff monitoring CCTV cameras covering the network struggle to detect stationary cars and then divert traffic into other lanes. In October, the Government ordered a review into smart motorway safety.

(<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/01/11/crime-tsar-reveals-astonishment-highways-england-says-smart/>).

Zahid was born in Afghanistan in 2000. His family fled the wars there to settle in North West London where Zahid studied at Crest Academy secondary school.

He obtained a place at Middlesex University and was made a 'digital ambassador' where he used social media to share experiences of student life.

He had also worked as an assistant manager at a local supermarket and did work experience at a local solicitors.

His family declined to comment while a police investigation is ongoing.

However, a relative of one of the students with brain injuries said: "Smart motorways need to be investigated further."

The Transport Secretary Grant Shapps ordered a review into the safety of smart motorways CREDIT: ANDREW CROWLEY

Claire Mercer, whose husband Jason (<https://www.crowdjustice.com/case/smart-motorway-jr/>) died when he became stranded on the M1 and has set up the Smart Motorways Kill (<https://smartmotorwayskill.co.uk/>) campaign, said: "The death toll keeps rising. The only hope is this government actually does something effective."

The Sunday Telegraph knows the names of the injured but has chosen not to identify them.

A Middlesex University spokeswoman said it was providing support to those involved and "cooperating fully with all relevant authorities in the matter."

Dev Naran, eight, was killed when the car he was in had to stop on the M6 'dynamic' smart motorway where the hard shoulder had been turned into a live lane and Highways England controllers failed to spot the stationary vehicle

Jill Greenfield, of Fieldfisher solicitors which is representing three of the severely injured, said: "This is the most terrible tragedy. One young man has died and three men in their 20's have had their lives devastated by a collision involving their vehicle and a lorry on a smart motorway."

Claire Mercer has campaigned to prove that smart motorways can be dangerous after her husband, Jason, 44, died on the M1 last year CREDIT: CHARLOTTE GRAHAM/CAG PHOTOGRAPHY LTD

A Highways England (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/highways-england>) spokeswoman said the incident was "tragic", their sympathies were with those affected and they are supporting the police investigation so it would be "inappropriate to comment".

A lorry driver has been charged with causing death by dangerous driving and four counts of causing serious injury by dangerous driving.

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