

GM withheld information about crashes tied to defective ignition switch

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Documents obtained by the *New York Times* reveal that General Motors (GM) withheld information from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) regarding several fatal crashes linked to an ignition switch defect. The *Times* revelations, published Wednesday, further suggest that General Motors executives worked consciously to cover up the defect, which likely killed scores if not hundreds.

After delaying for more than a decade, earlier this year GM ordered a recall of several low-cost models whose ignition switches can be easily jarred out of the run position. This can lead to loss of vehicle control and the failure of airbags to deploy.

The *Times* recently filed a series of Freedom of Information Act requests with the NHTSA for death inquiries. These inquiries are sent out by the NHTSA to GM and other car companies when a deadly crash happens. Their purpose is to see if there were any possible defects that could have led to the deaths.

One report the *Times* received from NHTSA regarded the tragic case of Gene Erikson. Riding as a passenger in a Saturn Ion in 2004, Erikson's vehicle swerved into a tree. The air bags failed to deploy and Erikson died. He was 25 years old.

When NHTSA sent its inquiry asking why the car acted that way, GM sent back a reply saying the company had not evaluated the cause of the accident. In its response, GM said the reason behind its lack of evaluation may have been that there was not "sufficient reliable information to accurately assess the cause [of the accident]."

This was patently false. Just a month before replying to the NHTSA inquiry, General Motors made an internal review of the issue. The GM engineer leading that review concluded that the Saturn Ion in which Erikson was riding most likely lost power. This led to

the car swerving and the air bags failing to deploy.

Deepening the tragedy is the fact that the driver of the vehicle, Candice Anderson, admitted to criminally negligent homicide in the death of her friend. The police report found trace amounts of Xanax in her blood. However, in light of the revelations about the ignition defect, it became clear that she was not responsible for the crash. However, GM, knowing that the crash was most likely caused by engine failure, at the time charged that Anderson was "intoxicated on illegal drugs" in an attempt to deflect blame.

These revelations further undermine the claim, advanced by GM in its internal investigation, that no one in the company understood the relation between the ignition defect and air bag non-deployment. On that basis the company labeled the ignition defect a customer satisfaction issue rather than a safety issue.

This particular case, where GM denied having conducted an investigation into the cause of an accident when it, in fact, had, is just one of several incidences where according to the *Times*, "The company repeatedly found a way not to answer the simple question from regulators of what led to a crash."

The *Times* obtained many other death inquiries from the NHTSA in which the ignition problem was later identified as the cause of the crash. Three of these inquiries, including Erickson's, contain statements by GM claiming not to have assessed the cause. In several other cases the company wrote: "GM opts not to respond." In one crash, the company said it was prevented from answering the NHTSA by attorney-client privilege.

In another incident, GM received a report from the Vermont state police about a crash that happened in 2007. The State Trooper report drew a direct link between the ignition switch failure and the failure of

the air bags to deploy. While GM forwarded this report to NHTSA, NHTSA never looked at it and, purportedly, only one person at GM did.

When asked for comment by the *Times*, David Friedman, NHTSA's acting administrator, stated "GM's decision-making, structure, process, and corporate culture stood in the way of safety at a time when air bags were failing to work properly in millions of GM products."

A federal grand jury began an investigation earlier this month into the GM cover-up. Recent documents released by GM parts supplier Delphi Automotive as part of the investigation demonstrate that a ranking executive of GM was aware of the ignition key defect as far back as 2005. The same documents show that GM officials deliberately chose not to repair defective ignition switches on several low-cost models because a recall and part replacement would impact the corporation's profits.

GM has been trying to defend itself by claiming that the ignition defect, and the 11-year delay in recalling the deadly vehicles, were due to the inadequacies of mid-level management. However, the mid-level engineer the company fired and tried to saddle with a large share of the blame spent years trying to find solutions to the issue, even after having his proposals rejected by internal committees of the firm, it seems, for being too expensive.



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