

## GAME OF CHICKEN ANYONE?

by Ann Gerhardt, MD  
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Maria nearly slapped my hand when I rested it on the open car window, as our taxi sat in a busy intersection. A few more inches outside the car and a passing car could make me an amputee.

I thought I must have found the one safe and polite taxi driver in all Lima: He was leaving a few feet between him and all other cars, giving other cars right-of-way and not blasting through intersections. THEN he pulled out his glasses and put them on. The car jolted forward and we were cutting off cars right and left, just like usual.

A physician colleague told me that traffic rules exist in Peru, but no one follows them. Instead they follow the rules of “Chicken” with the gutsiest drivers advancing and the chickens interminably late. Drivers keep moving into whatever tiny space they want to create, until the opposing driver backs off. One ‘wins’ and drives ahead a few inches and the other ‘loses’ and sits, waiting for another break. To picture an intersection of two 4-lane streets, imagine ants converging on a crumb.

Cars in moving traffic look more like balls from sling shots. At least they move, but there is a lot of swerving. Very few roads have lane markings. When present, they are ignored. More than one tiny car fits in a lane, so why waste space? Swerving between lines of cars and inching out whoever may already be in line, is the norm. Small city streets, with only one lane each direction, are fair game for using the oncoming lane as an extended passing lane.

An unwritten set of rules prevails. Instead of stop signs, drivers honk as they approach a blind intersection, to tell others of their impending crash. Somehow a rule-less negotiation occurs, which may be related to which car is moving with the most velocity, and allows one car to go through first. (In the U.S. we have an also-bad custom of naive people expecting an oncoming car to stop at a stop sign and being squashed when the car doesn’t).

After one day I was sure that motor vehicle accidents kill most residents of Lima, Peru. I was wrong. If not direct trauma, I reasoned, it should be heart attacks from fear. Wrong again. The leading cause of death in Peru is communicable disease, though that statement must be qualified by the fact that in 1990 nearly 50% of the deaths were unregistered. Many people don’t go to the hospital to die or be counted. But there are a lot of amputees.

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## HEALTHY CHOICES FOR MIND AND BODY

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“External causes” (aha!! – motor vehicle accidents perhaps?) kill most 20-59 year old males. In 1999 a whopping 79,695 people died in motor vehicle transport accidents in Peru. By way of comparison, there were ‘only’ ~ 45,000 motor vehicle accident deaths per year in the U.S., though the population is 10 times that of Peru and more people own and drive cars in the States.

Drivers play the game of chicken with pedestrians also. Cars don’t give right of way or even slow down for pedestrians. On the other hand, pedestrians don’t run across streets to avoid cars. Young, healthy pedestrians pick the time to cross, take long strides and DO NOT LOOK at the oncoming traffic. (Perhaps I saw very few old pedestrians because of this behavior). After two weeks, I began to mimic the technique. Once a car that had pulled out of a parking place actually slowed down to let me cross. Final score: Cars: 524, Me: 1.

Signaling a swerve or trying to prevent someone else’s swerve requires honking. There is a lot of honking in Peru – and the nice part is that it occurs without the appearance of anger. Honking just takes the place of a turn signal and gives the thumb something to do.

Which brings me to the good part of Peruvian driving: I saw very few drivers talking on cell phones while they were driving. They need both hands on the wheel, obviously needed to swerve better and to keep the honking thumb ready to serve.