Thomas Walters of Blenheim, Ontario Died of "Medical Condition" But Physical Evidence Suggests Caution

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It was reported that Thomas Walters of Blenheim, Ontario died yesterday morning (Sunday, November 28, 2010) "as a result of a heart-related medical condition" and not due to the single vehicle collision that he was involved in on Middle Line just east of Charing Cross Road, south of Chatham, Ontario.

The Chatham Daily News reported: "Walters was travelling east on Middle Line just east of Charing Cross Road when the black Ford Explorer Sport Trac he was driving left the roadway and went into a field, striking a hydro pole, before coming to a stop a short distance away".

While the possibility of a medical condition causing the initial events may be so, the evidence at the site is complicated and could lead to alternative interpretations as I will describe below.

I visited the site this afternoon and documented the evidence which will be shown in the following photos.

First is a view looking east along Middle Line, looking in the direction that Walters was travelling just before his Explorer left the roadway.

The two cones on the right side of the road, near the grass edge, identify the position of the right and left side tire marks of the Explorer as it left the roadway. Further in the background you will see the tire marks entering a small ditch adjacent to the "80 km/h" sign and even further I will show you that the vehicle then enters the field and begins to travel along the field parallel to the roadway. The vehicle then impacts a utility pole that his located next to my black car that is parked on the right shoulder far in the distant background.

In the photo below you should be able to recognize the tire marks as they travel through the grass and through the small ditch. The small orange cones in the background are there to help you locate the tire marks as they enter the field and travel toward a utility pole in the background.

By studying the character of the tire marks and comparing them to the tire marks in previous loss-of-control accident cases in this News section you should be able to appreciate that the tire marks are not typical of a loss-of-control event. Recall that we almost exclusively see the curved "yaw" type tire marks in a loss-of-control event and there are none to be seen at this site. In fact, if you look at the photo below you can actually see the tread pattern of the tire as it passes through the wet area in the ditch. Clearly this tire is not being braked or accelerated and the vehicle is simply moving along as if it was still on the road.

Note also that the vehicle does not become airborne over this depression in the ditch and therefore this is a sign that the vehicle is not travelling very quickly.

As the vehicle gets onto the field you can see below that I have placed additional cones so that you can follow the tire marks more easily. Observe how the earth is not chewed

up or thrown about indicating that the tires of the vehicle are simply rolling along the surface.

Now look in the background of the above photo and see how close the right side tire mark gets to the utility pole. If the driver was attempting to commit suicide then why would he miss the opportunity of striking this pole even though we will see that he eventually collided with another pole further in the background.

In fact, as seen in the photo below, the Explorer just passes by the first pole without striking it. I have detailed photos and I looked at the pole closely and confirm that there were no indications of contact to this pole.

But as you take a look in the background of the above photo you should be able to follow the tire marks as outlined by my cones as the Explorer eventually collides with a utility pole.

In the photo below I am using my finger to point out a specific part of the right tire mark to demonstrate its special character.

A close-up view of the above photo is shown in the photo below. You should be able to recognize (once again) that the tire mark contains the imprint of the tread of the tire and therefore it is another indication that the vehicle is just rolling along the field without any apparent effort by the driver to stop the vehicle.

The photo below now shows the tire marks as they travel in a straight line and approach the area of impact with a utility pole.

Consider the long distance being depicted in the above photo and the apparent lack of any change in the tire marks as they approach the area of impact. Below is a photo in the immediate vicinity of the impact. The cones are placed so that you can identify where the left and right tire marks are located in relation to the impacted pole.

What you should recognize in the above photo is that the vehicle struck the utility pole at about the left tire track, as indicated by where I placed the left cone. In the background you can see the pieces of the pole that have been displaced by the impact. You should also be able to recognize that, after the impact occurred, the characteristics of the tire marks changed. Observe again how the tire marks leading into impact were essentially straight. After impact the vehicle begins to rotate, as one would expect, and so the tire marks take on the appearance of the yaw marks that we would expect in a loss-of-control condition. This is not unexpected. Consider what has happened. The Explorer has hit the utility pole with the extreme left edge of its front end. This impact was not applied to the centre of gravity of the vehicle and therefore a "moment arm" was created, as is understood whenever a force is applied offset from the centre-of-gravity of a rigid body. This application of a force away from the centre-of-gravity causes the vehicle to rotate and we see that in the evidence of the curved tire marks after impact.

The photo below provides a closer view of the area of impact. It shows how the small diameter pole was sheared near its base and how its broken portions were displaced to the east. And of course it shows the change in the character of the tire marks.

To complete the description of the vehicle's path, the photo below shows the tire marks as they curve toward the vehicle's final rest position back toward the roadside.

There is nothing mysterious in the photo but I just want you to see the vehicle path until it reaches it rest position. Below in another view showing the evidence near the rest position in the small ditch.

So now you have seen the full extent of the vehicle's travel. Now for some general numbers. Let's go back to the beginning again and look at some distances.

The point at which the vehicle first entered the grass up to the point where it entered the small ditch was a distance of about 41 metres. The distance from that ditch to where the vehicle barely missed striking the first utility pole was about 78 metres. The distance from the first utility pole (just missed) to the impacted pole was about 69 metres. And the distance from impact to final rest was about 50 metres. Let's add up all these distances: 41+78+69+50 = @238 metres.

Let's use a ballpark speed of 90 km/h because that comes to an easy translation of 25 metres per second. So at 90 km/h the vehicle travels the 238 metres in about 9.5 seconds. A long time.

Let's remove the distance from impact to rest (50 metres) resulting in a distance of 188 metres and, assuming a speed of 90 km/h, this would be covered in about 7.5 seconds. Still a very long time.

And consider the characteristics of the tire marks leading to the area of impact and appreciate that they are straight, they indicate a rolling tire, they indicate no apparent action by the driver to either brake or steer. What would you expect?

Eliminating the medical findings, the site evidence alone would suggest an unusual set of circumstances. A vehicle exits the roadway and travels a long time and distance without any sign of attempting to stop or steer away from hazards. The "medical condition" that would place the driver in an incapacitating state would be logical choice of possibilities. A pathologist would examine the driver's body and determine that a lack of pre-impact blood flow would be exhibited in the driver's tissues and therefore indicative of a pre-impact heart anomaly. But due to the early occurrence of this happening an autopsy could not yet have been performed. So, not so fast.

While a medical condition might have precipitated the original occurrence we must also be careful to understand the impact and how it might complicate the conclusions. Let us remember that the impact to the vehicle was to the very left edge of the front end. The diameter of the pole was quite small and from past experience I know it would not be sufficient to produce the type of severe deceleration that could result in fatal injuries to a fully-restrained driver of a "heavier than average" vehicle. But an offset impact like this could fool the air bag system into a delayed deployment. An auxiliary sensor is often mounted to the front end of a vehicle to detect conditions such as pole impacts but such a sensor is often located in the centre front of a vehicle and would not be good a detecting an impact that is so narrow and so distant from its location. The medically distressed driver could be slumped forward at impact and the delayed air bag could deploy against the driver's body resulting in a much more severe force to the upper torso and head than the actual impact.

While to some it might not matter whether the driver died from a medical condition or from air bag induced injuries, to others that is an important question. Thomas Walters was reported to be 33 years old, not 90. That does not necessarily mean a lot but the average 33 year old male does not just suddenly die of a heart condition. But he may be momentarily incapacitated. On occasions it is unpopular and controversial to report that the safety devices that are designed to protect us indeed have led to our harm. There are persons in our midst who believe they know what is best for us and that we do not need to know these complications. One or two air bag fatalities are worth the price when perhaps hundreds are saved. That is until the "one or two" are members of your family and someone has decided for you that you will not be informed of those possibilities. It is my goal in many of these articles to present facts to you, unpretty or unpopular as they may seem, to allow you to interpret the evidence and be able to judge for yourself what is and what is not good for you.