Takata Airbags: An Ethical Failure for Engineering

Having manufactured airbags since 1988 [1], Takata Corporation became one of the major suppliers of safety equipment for automobiles in the world with about 20% market share [2]. Takata’s own mission statement referred to their “responsibilities to society” to produce safe products for a safe world, and for their products to be something “people can rely on” [1]. Prior to the airbag recall discussed here, Takata already had a serious product recall on seatbelts in 1995 [3], which should have served as a warning sign to automakers and a wakeup call to the engineering staff. One of the earliest reports of death due to airbag explosion was in 2003 but was written off as an anomaly [4]. In 2009, after more deaths had been attributed to airbag malfunction, Honda made the first small recall [2]. It was not until 2014 that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) issued and order for Takata to recall its airbags [1]. Engineers at Takata had recognized some problems with the inflaters early in the design process but did not release that data until investigations had started. The initial testing was likely not sufficient to find the full extent of the problem since the explosions happened many years after car manufacture and installation. In deposition by Engineer Thomas Sheridan who working at the factories that designed and produced the inflaters, he stated that he attempted to examine failed parts, but they had already been discarded on orders from the vice president of engineering, Al Bernat [5]. Other Engineers who worked at the Moses Lake plant in Washington also made statements about concealing or falsifying information in similar ways. **By concealing this data from both regulatory bodies and vehicle manufacturers, Takata violated tenets 1,2, and 4 of ethics code of the American Institute of Chemical Engineers (AIChE) [6] and the first, second, and third fundamental canons of the National Society of Professional Engineers’s (NSPE) [7] code of ethics in a way that led to multiple deaths and injuries for consumers, and extremely costly recalls for its vehicle manufacturing customers.**

Both engineering associations have first and foremost to “Hold paramount the safety, health, and welfare of the public” [6][7]. Takata claimed to “dream of a society with zero fatalities from traffic accidents.” However, it ignored early warnings in 1999 from then Chief Engineer Mark Lillie that their switch to ammonium nitrate would be dangerous for consumers [8]. The US branch also ran safety tests in which they edited the results to remove most of the failed results, passing this on to Honda [9]. Modifying test results to hide failures was a strategy to sell more parts rather than provide safe parts for those vehicles. While the engineers were not directly responsible for ignoring the warnings, they did not decide to reveal this information to the public or the authorities after it was obviously ignored. The lack of action left the public endangered and auto makers with defective parts in thousands of vehicles.

Both associations require avoiding deception, tenet eleven of the AIChE code [6] and fundamental canon five of the NSPE code [7], and engineering executives were intentionally deceptive with their concealment of potential instabilities in violation of the ethical codes. Documents from as early as 2004 show internal communications about falsified test results and data modification to conceal problems from auto manufacturers [9]. Engineers did not release findings until investigations started, leaving the illusion of safety for the public, and opening the door for corporate partners to be unwitting accomplices in the deceptions. Transparency and honesty are vital for the integrity of the engineering profession, and this case weakens that integrity in the public eye.

A commitment to protecting the environment is part of the first tenet in the AIChE ethics code [6], but public safety should have been paramount in the choice of accelerant. Takata partly chose ammonium nitrate as accelerant for the inflaters partly based on lower emissions when compared with the industry standard tetrazole, also introduced by Takata [10], and less toxic than the older option, sodium azide [11]. While well-meaning, this is a dubious choice considering ammonium nitrate’s history of accidental explosions throughout the 1900s. Once the recalls were in full swing, automakers commissioned an outside investigation into the matter from Orbital ATK, which found fault with the design related to known instabilities with ammonium nitrate [12].

Accepting responsibility for actions and heed criticism is listed for both ethics codes as well. The engineering staff may have had undue pressure from company executives to stay quiet about perceived problems with their design.

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