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UK cars to have black box crash recorders

By Sophie Goodchild

British cars will soon be routinely fitted with black-box recorders similar to those used in aircraft. They will make it possible to determine with almost absolute certainty the cause of any accident - and who is responsible.

General Motors is pioneering the technology in nine of its latest US models and has confirmed that the recorders will be introduced in British cars in the next two years. Other companies, including Ford and Mercedes-Benz, say their engineers are developing similar systems to improve car safety.

In the event of a crash, the boxes will give clues as to why the accident happened. They will indicate whether the driver was wearing a seatbelt, the exact speed of the car and the position of the brakes.

They have already been installed by the Metropolitan Police after complaints about the number of police vehicles involved in accidents with members of the public.

The move has been welcomed by safety campaigners but the Automobile Association said last night that it was "very worried". It fears the box could infringe drivers' civil liberties.

In theory, the information in the black-box recorder would be the property of the car owner. But the AA fears that both the police and insurers would demand access to the data in the event of an accident.

The boxes will use a microprocessor, situated in the dashboard, to record and store data. The box will automatically track any mechanical problem as well as recording speed.

Currently only the motor manufacturers have the capability to access the material stored in the boxes.