

In designing its 1971 Pinto, the Ford Motor Company decided to place the gas tank behind the rear axle. Mounted in this position, the tank was punctured during tests by projecting bolts when hit from the rear at 20 NIPH. Ford decided, however, not to change the position of the gas tank primarily in order to reduce production costs. An internal memorandum written in 1971 recommended that Ford should wait to do this until 1976 when the government was expected to introduce fuel tank standards (none existed in 1971). The memo estimated that by waiting until 1976 the Company could save 20.9 million dollars. In addition, the Company decided not to install a part costing \$6.65 per unit which Ford engineers determined could reduce the risk of the gas tank puncturing in a collision at 20 MPH. In 1977 the National Highway Traffic and Safety Administration claimed that a safety defect existed in Pintos manufactured from 1971 to 1976. In 1978 Ford ordered a recall of nearly 2 million vehicles. Between 1971 and 1978 plaintiffs brought about 50 lawsuits against Ford in connection with Pinto rear end collisions.

Did the Ford engineers involved in designing and testing the Pinto, who were aware of the problems associated with the placement of the gas tank behind the rear axle, fail to meet their ethical responsibilities by not taking steps to bring these problems to the attention of the public? If so, why? If not, why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: The Ford engineers were not morally required to bring the Pinto's design problems to the attention of the public. Engineers have a duty to view safety to the public as paramount in their work. For the Ford engineers, their work was to design, test, and make recommendations concerning the Pinto. They had a moral responsibility to test the Pinto thoroughly, report the test results, accurately and fully, to express safety concerns in a clear and forthright manner, and to recommend changes in design that they viewed as warranted by their concerns. The Ford engineers were not morally required personally to shoulder the entire responsibility for assuring the safety of the Pinto by taking their concerns to the public about management decisions that did not follow their recommendations.

Case from the 1995 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions, Illinois Institute of Technology, 1995.