



## Car Insurance

by John D. Whitaker

I am always surprised when people come into my office after an auto accident and tell me that they don't even know where their automobile insurance policies are, let alone what they provide. This is like going to Las Vegas and betting all you have on a game you don't understand. I know most insurance policies are long, confusing documents that are full of legal terms, but if you want to avoid a catastrophe down the road, I would suggest you get them out and figure out what they cover before something bad happens.

An insurance policy is really just a contract between you and your insurance company. The contract has various types of situations you can purchase insurance to cover. The more types and amounts of insurance you buy, the more it costs. Liability coverage protects you from claims from other people you may hurt in an accident. Medical Payments coverage will cover your medical bills. Comprehensive covers damage to your car from collision or other types of damage. The amount of coverage you purchase is called the policy limit. If your injuries go beyond the policy limit, you are responsible, not your insurance company.

Wyoming law requires that all drivers in this state maintain at least \$25,000 in liability insurance coverage. You must prove that you have insurance when you purchase your license plates. The idea behind this law is that our legislature has decided that if you are going to use our roads, and make a mistake while driving, you must be able to compensate the people you hurt. Unfortunately, in most serious injury cases, \$25,000 does not go very far.

There are two serious issues people frequently overlook when purchasing car insurance. First, do you have coverage for an uninsured motorist? The law may require that all drivers have insurance, but remember that some people break the



law. If an uninsured driver crashes into your car, and you don't have uninsured motorist coverage on your policy, you may not have any insurance that will protect you. The second type of coverage you should have is underinsured coverage. This insurance would apply where the driver that crashes into you only has minimal policy limits and the costs of your injuries go well beyond his limits. I have people tell me that they think they are fully protected because they purchased "full coverage." This is a meaningless term. Each insurance policy is written in different language, and one may provide coverage for a specific

thing where another may not. You should keep in mind that a week or two in a hospital could cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. If the guy that hit you only has \$25,000 in coverage, or worse, no insurance at all, you are going to be on the hook for the balance of your expenses unless you have the right kind of insurance.

Generally, uninsured and underinsured coverage is reasonably inexpensive insurance. You may also want to look at what is sometimes called an "umbrella policy." These are insurance policies that kick in when your primary insurance policy limits are exhausted. This is also very affordable insurance and can increase the level of your protection dramatically. The idea is to buy insurance to protect yourself and family. You should never rely on the other drivers on the road to make your insurance decisions for you.

It is always a good idea to talk these issues over with your insurance agent and lawyer to make sure you are covered. Try this exercise. The next time you pull up at an intersection, look at the guy beside you in the old beat up truck with no tail-lights, cracked windshield and a fender hooked to the frame with barbed wire. Ask yourself if you think he has purchased enough insurance to protect you and your family. If you think so, think again.

**The Wyoming State Bar does not certify any lawyer as a specialist or expert. Anyone considering a lawyer should independently investigate the lawyer's credentials and ability, and not rely upon advertisements or self-proclaimed expertise. This informative column is brought to you by John Whitaker who practices personal injury and criminal law throughout Wyoming. He can be reached at [JDWTL@aol.com](mailto:JDWTL@aol.com) or by calling his office in Casper at 265-6204.**