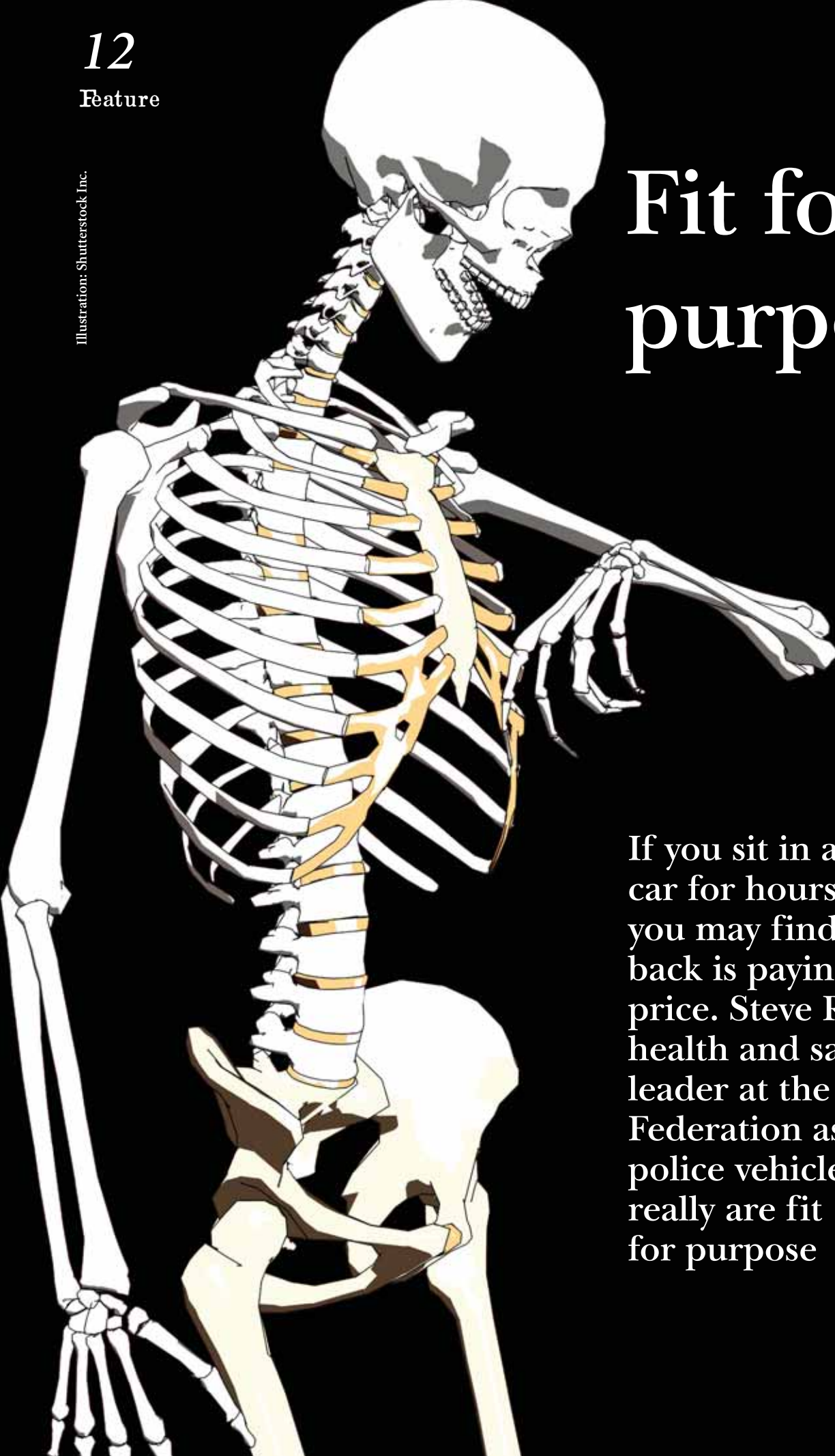


# Fit for purpose?



If you sit in a panda car for hours on end, you may find your back is paying the price. Steve Rands, health and safety leader at the Met Federation asks if police vehicles really are fit for purpose

Police officers were taken off foot patrol during the 1960s to respond to quick calls for assistance in police vehicles. The move was hailed by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in their annual report, 1967, as 'the biggest change in fundamental operational police methods since 1829'. It described the advent of unit beat policing immortalised as 'the panda car'.

It is that quick response that has led to each force interpreting just which are the best vehicles to be used for policing needs. This approach to fleet purchases could be the root cause of many unforeseen health and safety issues. Back in the 1980s, the purchase options were pretty much limited to British Leyland. In fact, the very first police car I drove was an Austin Allegro; this was soon to be replaced by a one litre Mini Metro. Both of these vehicles were used for general police patrol and were not supposed to be utilised as fast response vehicles.

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It is fair to say that some 23 years later little appears to have changed. Around the country there are still police vehicles being driven in a way that goes beyond the capabilities for which they were intended. There have been many technological advances that have improved vehicle performance such as better braking efficiencies and handling characteristics, but the standard fitting of blue lights and sirens does not automatically turn a family saloon car into a police vehicle.

Most police forces all have some performance enhanced vehicles on their fleet for traffic duty or an armed response unit, where certain

performance criteria need to be met. But the largest proportion of police vehicles have nothing additional that makes them any different from the rest of the motoring public.

The well used phrase, fit for purpose, is widely used out of context, but in this instance that is exactly what a police vehicle should be. Nothing makes a more dramatic headline than an accident involving a police vehicle, but just how many times are the real causes of the accident investigated. Just how many police collisions are investigated with a view to establishing whether the vehicle being used was appropriate for the role?

Over the years many forces have slashed the time allocated to driver training, some have even outsourced this task. However, it must be understood that driver training does not automatically make a vehicle fit for purpose.

The ideal police vehicle would be one that is designed from the road, wheels upwards, then and only then, in consultation with the users would we be somewhere near understanding just what a police car needs to do. It is not just performance that makes a police vehicle, there are many other areas to be explored.

Driver comfort should be a primary consideration. Today's modern police officer not only wears body armour, but is also kitted out with a variety of equipment hanging from a belt around the waist.

A survey of Met officers, carried out in 2005 as part of the Health and Safety Executive's Better Backs campaign, found the cockpit design of a patrol car was one of the reasons cited as aiding an officer's pain and discomfort. As longer tours of duty are on the increase, this naturally leads to officers being at the wheel for longer periods of time, which in turn could be exacerbating the back pain being experienced. Whilst on the subject of back pain, a key area often overlooked is that of equipment storage. Personally I have seen and dealt with a number of injuries to

officers who have been injured after being struck by a piece of equipment that has been left loose either on the back seat or being unrestrained in the boot of the estate car. Safe storage of kit is one thing, but all too often safe deployment of kit is overlooked.

Regulations covering manual handling say that those performing the task should, where practicable, be kept free from risk to their health. Over reaching into a car boot to retrieve a sign or a stack of cones could cause any number of back ailments.

My final and perhaps most controversial point is that of prisoner transportation. It is my honest view that the only safest way to transport someone who has had their liberty taken from them, is in a vehicle that has an area that separates the prisoner from the driver or other occupants. I will stress here that I can see that there will be circumstances when there is no alternative but to place a prisoner on the back seat of the car. This practice can be extremely dangerous leaving the driver vulnerable if the person detained were to suddenly become violent whilst the vehicle is in motion.

This problem could be solved in one of two ways. Firstly, force policy could state that only appropriate vehicles should be used for the transportation of prisoners, or there is the engineering solution. Part of the vehicle specification at design stage should take account of a screen between the front and rear areas of the car. In practical terms this may not be appropriate in the smaller saloons preferred by most forces and therefore may mean that larger vehicles would need to be purchased to allow sufficient space.

In my opinion, the only vehicle suitable as an emergency response police car is one that is designed specifically for the role for which it is intended, not one that is merely adapted. Consultation with the users would go along way to assist in identifying the right tool for the job.