

20 OCT 2003

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
TRANSPORT AND
REGIONAL SERVICES

Submission to the Inquiry into National Road Safety.

From the Ulysses Club Inc.

16th October 2003

Introduction :

On October 7th 2003, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Transport and Regional Services invited the Ulysses Club to provide a submission on the 'Inquiry into National Road Safety'.

The terms of reference are:

1. Review the strategic objectives, priority areas and proposed measures in the National Road safety Strategy 2001 – 2010 and the Road Safety Action Plans for 2001 and 2001 and for 2003 and 2004 and consider whether these remain appropriate.
2. Identify any additional measures or approaches that could or should be adopted by the Commonwealth, States or Territories, Local Government and non-Government agencies and bodies (including industry) to reduce road trauma.
3. Identify factors that may be impeding progress in reducing road trauma, and suggest how these could be addressed.

As a motorcycle related Club, the Ulysses Club wishes to comment on these terms of reference specifically with motorcycle safety as the main subject.

The Ulysses Club consists of members over the age of 40 years who mainly ride motorcycles as a social and touring pursuit.

Approximately half of Australia's motorcyclists are currently over the age of 40 ⁽¹⁾ and approximately half of this number are members of the Ulysses Club.

Background

- Improvements to motor vehicle engineering and road design have achieved significant reductions in the road toll over the past twenty years. Road authorities now claim driver behavior to be the area where further road safety gains will be achieved.
- It is apparent that engineering solutions still have their place. Improved roads have contributed to reductions in the number of crashes.
- Improvements in engineering of vehicles has reduced the incidence of injury to less than 40% of all vehicles involved in crashes. ⁽²⁾
- The containment "space" in which car occupants experience a crash has been improved remarkably and it appears that the reduction and plateauing of the road toll parallels the market penetration of safer cars. As fleet dominance of safer cars approaches, the road toll is levelling out.

However, from a motorcycling perspective, little has changed in 30 years. Crash rates per 10,000 vehicles remains at about the same rate and the injury rates remain about the same, in the order of 90% of all crashes. ⁽³⁾

Speed

It is agreed that travel speed affects the severity of crashes and it is noticeable that the proliferation of speed cameras and other speed detection devices in the past two years has failed dismally to decrease the road toll in any of the jurisdictions.

Motorists and motorcycle riders have become blasé to the penalties and it is now accepted that speeding fines are part of the normal operating costs of a vehicle. The impersonal nature of a speeding infringement received in the mail has little detrimental effect on the effort to reduce average speeds on the roads. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a speed infringement notice issued by an Officer 'on site' has a better chance of changing the defaulter's behavior than a notice received in the post some days after the alleged offence. The general public now believes that speed cameras are revenue-raising devices leaving the Police Forces and Governments with a dilemma that they are reluctant to back away from.

Dodging speed cameras is now 'a game' played by all road users.

We have the situation in Victoria where the tolerance is some three kilometres per hour over the posted limit with motorists and riders constantly peering at their speedometer instead of the road environment ahead. The Australian Standard on speed reading devices indicates an accepted tolerance of ten km/h, well less than the tolerance given to road users. Speed is a factor in crashes, but it is way down in the list of causes, with inattention, fatigue and road conditions all being way ahead in the causation list.

Speed detection must go on but must be administered by 'real' enforcement officers actually on the road. The best deterrent to speed is to actually see a Police vehicle on the road. The presence of marked police vehicles on the road will have the effect of causing an improvement in the driving behaviour of all road users.

*There has been too much emphasis on speed detection, at the low end of the scale, by speed cameras.
Speed detection duties must be performed by 'on-road' enforcement officers.*

Road Environment

Improving the safety of roads is the single most significant achievable factor in reducing road trauma.

The benefit / cost ratio of 'better roads', both socially and economically is a major reason to implement this ongoing policy. The excellent Black Spot program has proved to be a major factor in reducing the road toll in the past twenty years and must be accelerated even further in the future.

The passing lane program similarly must also be accelerated, as the benefits are enormous in reducing the road toll. The average cost of a passing lane is some \$1.7M, compared to the cost of a human life, currently at about \$950,000⁽⁴⁾ – the benefits are obvious!

Other measures including the clearing of roadside hazards, shoulder sealing and audible edge lining must be maintained and increased. The sealing of shoulders, especially on the insides of corners, is important to motorcyclists. The sealing of gravel surfaced side roads and private driveways that attach to more major roads should also be a priority.

(It is recommended that side roads should be sealed back to a distance of ten metres and driveways sealed to a distance of five metres.)

Gravel on a corner is a real safety hazard for motorcyclists and the cause of many crashes that maybe are reported as speed related!

The practice of crack sealing must be urgently reviewed.

At the moment it is applied to road surfaces that are way past their 'use by date' in order to get another few years out of the pavement.

Not only does crack sealing not work (it fails to prevent the ingress of moisture) but it presents a vulnerable road user with a surface with a differential skid resistance. Adequate traction is a 'must' for motorcycles (and all motor vehicles as well).

Unsafe roadside planting must be eliminated.

Likewise, Road Safety Barriers must not be ameliorated with shrubs and trees, as these do not provide a softer impact. A visible barrier indicates that danger could lie ahead!

It is recommended that the various road authorities adopt and use road safety audits.

A road safety audit is a formal examination of an existing or planned road in which an independent qualified examiner reports on the crash potential of a particular section of pavement. Standards Australia is about to re-release a handbook for Road Engineers entitled, 'A Guide to Traffic Engineering Practice: Part 4', for the use of auditors when assessing road environments in respect to safety. The application of this guide must be encouraged. Motorcycles are mentioned specifically.

It is recommended that all roads be subjected to an audit every two years or when changes have been implemented to the road environment.

Driver Impairment

Impairment related to alcohol, drugs and fatigue is a major contributing factor to road fatalities and injuries.

Currently, in Victoria, 39% of all motorcyclists fatality injured have a BAC over the prescribed limit. ⁽⁵⁾ This figure had increased dramatically over the past few years and is still rising. Other States also report increasing figures for riding over the BAC limit.

Effective deterrence depends on convincing potential offenders that offences are very likely to be detected and punished. Unfortunately, to catch the offenders, all vehicle/ motorcycle owners must be somewhat inconvenienced.

Motorcyclists deem these errant riders as 'non-riders', to be removed from society by any means possible. This perception must be maintained by increased enforcement.

Motorcyclists and car drivers caught riding with a high BAC must lose their license on the first offence and when ready to return to the road, must also be forced to have an alcohol interlock installed on their motorcycle/car.

(A Company in Victoria has developed such a device for motorcycles and these should be investigated by all jurisdictions and their use implemented for two years on offenders machines.) Obviously, an educational program warning of the effects of alcohol and drug induced riding must be an on going directive from all Governments.

Recidivist offenders must be given access to rehabilitation programs.

Random breath testing programs must be increased and be performed 365 days of the year, not only on weekends and public holidays.

The public image of drunk drivers and riders must be portrayed as that of being 'criminal'!

The instance of driving and riding when fatigued is always going to be hard to detect. Adequate wayside stops must be provided and made to appear inviting with good shade and facilities.

Signs indicating the distance to the next wayside stop should be placed frequently.

Education programs should portray fatigue as the 'silent killer' to the road user. Warning signs and preventive measures must be addressed in the campaign.

Licensing and driver and rider management

License suspension is an important deterrent penalty but many offenders continue to drive/ride without licenses.

As with high BAC readings as mentioned earlier, motorcyclists who are fatally injured have a higher than average instance of riding without an appropriate license.⁽⁶⁾

To obtain a motorcycle license in Australia is quite hard with the excellent compulsory rider training programs that are now in existence in all States.

Many learner motorcyclists do not pass these tests but still ride on the road untrained and therefore unskilled.

Again, legitimate motorcyclists deem these deviants as being 'non-riders' and are generally very intolerant of these persons.

A system of having a persons' license related to the vehicle that they normally drive/ride would be an advantage. i.e., a number plate could be instantly referred to a central data base via a patrol car radio/satellite system for instant verification of whether that vehicle is currently registered and whether the registered driver/rider is currently licensed.

Of-course, there will be instances of the driver/rider being in charge of another persons vehicle, but a 'non-match' could be sufficient evidence to further investigate the anomaly.

A fine (small) should apply for drivers/riders that cannot produce a current license when requested to do so just because it is not with them at the time.

The NZ system where drivers/riders caught without a current license or with an unregistered vehicle automatically have their vehicle impounded, must be investigated for possible use in Australia.

The use of hand held mobile phones while driving is on the rise. Motorcyclists obviously cannot partake of this pastime but are at the mercy of car drivers that do. Enforcement must be increased to stamp out this unsafe practice.

More and more vehicles now have the option of a GPS system and the many advantages of this system are acknowledged. However, many GPS units can be programmed/changed on the run with the driver diverting his/her attention from the road environment to the control of the GPS.

This is even more unsafe than using a mobile phone while driving.

GPS systems must have a lock-out device that prevents the ability of the driver/rider to programme or change the unit's functions when the vehicle is in motion.

Special Issues

It has been previously mentioned that motorcyclists have to undergo a rigorous training and testing program in order to get their motorcycle license.

Car drivers, on the other hand, can be fully trained by their parents, friends or other members of the family.

This method of testing is far below the competence level required to obtain a motorcycle license. Since the implementation of compulsory motorcycle training the fatality rate of motorcyclists, especially those in the 17 to 29 year age range has plummeted. ⁽⁷⁾

Motorcyclists in their first year of riding are only permitted to ride machines that are under 250cc in capacity or are under a certain power to rate ratio, depending on which State one is a resident of.

This system obviously works with the rider graduating to a more powerful bike if they want to, after a year at a lower power level.

Car drivers, on the other hand, can go straight to a V8 or 'grey import' turbo and be permitted to carry as many passengers as they like, often with dire, well-publicized consequences.

It is recommended that a system similar to the current motorcycle system be investigated so that new drivers would be restricted to lower powered vehicles.

Alternative transport measures

It is noted that the increase in use of heavy transport in the near future is set to far outweigh that of light vehicles.

Heavy vehicles are responsible for the vast majority of damage to the pavement, a normal light car barely does no damage at all.

(Without heavy vehicles on the road, an urban road surface would have a life expectancy of some 200 years.)

As pavement condition is a large safety factor and because heavy vehicles are crashing in higher numbers, an alternative solution to this problem must be looked at.

Australia has a large land mass with only a potential 19.5 million people to pay taxes to maintain the road infrastructure. Traditionally, 95% of the road network is of the form of a 'spray sealed' pavement, which cannot possibly survive the rigors of heavy loads, and the forces that heavy vehicles impose on it.

Road transport has been the routine way to move freight across the country.

If the current permitted loads are further increased from 8 tonnes per axle, the problem will be even greater.

It is time for Governments to support the rail infrastructure and to even heavily subsidize the system so that the swing will be away from heavy vehicle freight movement.

The rail system is currently suffering from poor use and hence inefficiency.

After construction, roads will last longer and hence will be in better condition, for longer periods.

It is noted that the current National Road Safety Action Plan asks for the implementation of frontal identification systems for motorcycles.

The statement is then made that 'rider safety would be improved by a reduction in overall traffic speeds, but speeding is a much more common factor in motorcycle fatalities than in fatal crashes generally'. This club feels that this push by some police services to re-introduce front number plates is a thinly disguised and feeble attempt to raise revenue, without any accurate research or conclusive evidence that the introduction of frontal ID will have any significant affect on reducing speed of motorcycles and a reduction in the road toll. The club believes that the money proposed to be spent on such a measure could be better spent on putting police in marked vehicles back out on the road and out from behind their desks.

There is no proven relationship between having frontal ID on a motorcycle with the improved safety of the motorcyclist!

The fitting of frontal ID to a motorcycle will not have any affect on safety.

There is also no evidence that more motorcyclists than car drivers are involved in higher speeds when fatal crashes occur.

The Ulysses Club, on behalf of all motorcyclists, requests that this unproven and subjective part of the Action Plan be removed from further publications!

There are more productive and proven ways of enhancing motorcycle safety than the fitting of a number plate to the front of a motorcycle.

Motorcyclists are classed as 'vulnerable road users'.

At the moment, the Federal Government and the various State Governments do not have a motorcycle safety plan.

All motorcycle safety and awareness issues are financed by motorcyclists through the various State MRA's (Motorcycle Rider Associations) and the AMC (Australian Motorcycle Council) of which the Ulysses Club is a member.

(A request for \$31,000 to continue the work of the AMC was recently knocked back by the Federal Government. The request was placed via the ATSB through the Motorcycle Consultative Committee, on which the Ulysses Club also has a seat.)

As some ten percent of all fatalities involve motorcyclists (motorcyclists are about 13 times more likely to have a fatal crash than other road users), it is hard to perceive the lack of funds to facilitate safety improvements for motorcyclists.

Pedestrians and especially bicyclists, are well catered for with millions of dollars spent on special lanes and infrastructure but motorcycling gets zero!

The work of the AMC and like organisations cannot continue with the only source of income being from its members.

Road safety is not only the responsibility of the road users but the responsibility of Governments as well, as the cost in economic and social terms, continues to spiral upwards.

The Future

The accident rate in Australia is constantly being compared to that in European countries.

These OECD countries have much higher population densities and hence would be expected to have better roads.

The motorway standards found in these places would not be possible to replicate in Australia, purely on economic grounds.

Divided motorways provide a much safer environment for travelers while in Australia the vast majority of pavements are two-way with up to 220 km/h relative speed differentials with vehicles passing within one metre of each other.

One must wonder if the 40% reduction in road fatalities asked for in Australia within the next 8 years, is an almost impossible task. Maybe we are at or near the minimum possible level, with large amounts of effort bringing little or no advances in road safety.

Defeat must never be admitted however, all avenues must be explored with a strong emphasis placed on 'attitude changing'.

Consensus, consultancy and ongoing education must bring about this change.

The current unpopular method of revenue collection from wrong doers in the name of road safety is not, and will not, be successful.

References

- (1) RTA of NSW
- (2)(3)(7) Motorcycle Council of NSW, "Positioned for Safety", a road safety strategic plan for 2002 – 2005.
- (4) ATSB – The Australian Transport Safety Bureau.
- (5) VMAC – The Victorian Motorcycle Advisory Council, Communiqué.
- (6)(8) ATSB, Monogram #12, Motorcycle Safety