

Inquiry into Cycling Issues - Submission

Transport safety is a complex topic but it might be prudent to start by rethinking one fundamental “free” idea for the benefit of all road users, else we risk compounding problems down the track. Namely, this must include an assessment on the overall effectiveness and unintended consequences of our “uniquely Australian” (yet almost universally panned) all-age mandatory helmet laws [1] – something which the somewhat flawed CARRS-Q *Bicycle Helmet Research* monograph from 2011 fails to address [2].

If an increased uptake in cycling (beneficial to improved health and productivity) is a genuinely intended goal, we have to assist in its normalisation and not accept marginalisation and casual discrimination [3]. Sport cycling is great for some but unfortunately, the inconvenient reality after an introduction some 20 years ago of poorly thought out mandatory helmet laws unfairly targeting cyclists (despite good intentions) is that it has markedly diminished participation of this healthy and safe activity [4][5] to only those willing to fit under the guise of “fitness fanatic”. With Australia's worsening obesity-related disease crisis, barriers to entry for cycling needs to be reduced. The fickleness of potential and ex-participants of cycling – due to marginalisation by many groups (including, but not limited to: proponents of plentiful free on-street car parking, angry motorists demanding cyclist registration, and authority figures prioritising motor transport) – should not be underestimated by others who personally see no problem with existing bad laws [6].

We should actively encourage the return of safe and slow riders to our paths – helmetless to the local shops or park if they so choose; for they may be used to the convenience of driving or jogging without a helmet! In essence, this type of “forgotten cyclist” will unlikely opt to mix it with motor traffic – it is almost certainly safer than the commonly suggested “sharing” of the road with aggressive but generally inadequately-trained drivers, despite the use of a helmet [7] in the “share the road” scenario.

At the same time this genuine open encouragement will help improve perceptions, uptake, and safety for cycling, as well as safety for all other road users (including drivers being safer overall through better acknowledgement of cyclists, as a direct result of improved participation). At a courteous, safe, helmetless and slower-than-running pace speed, the new “normal” cyclists will also help improve cyclist-pedestrian relations and be less likely to exploit the latter as merely a slalom challenge. By making conditions better for cyclists – who act in the manner of coal mine canaries – optimal improvement to accessibility and safety for all can take effect. [8]

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As easy as it is to immediately dismiss the concept of repealing our mandatory helmet law and as counter-intuitive as it may first appear, the topic deserves a more serious discussion to determine whether there's actually overall benefit or detriment.

For the time-poor, strongly recommended here is a brief primer and introduction to this important issue at hand:

<http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/TEDxCopenhagen-Mikael-Colville>

The viewer may find that it could challenge certain ingrained notions of safety and well being.

An important reminder is that this submission is about choice, not restriction and that there are clear benefits to be gained.

1. <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/03/the-bike-helmet-paradox/273555/>
2. <http://helmetfreedom.org/1531/cars-q-research-part-one/>
3. <http://www.smh.com.au/national/are-you-a-casual-racist-20130530-2ndyy.html>
4. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0001457596000164>
5. <http://christinemgrant.com/2011/11/22/youre-safer-on-the-bicycle-than-on-the-sofa/>
6. <http://helmetfreedom.org/858/7-out-of-10-doctors-prefer-helmet-freedom/>
7. <http://cyclehelmets.org/1209.html>
8. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/relationships/news-and-views/sarah-hampson/why-cycling-can-make-you-a-happier-person/article2326191/singlepage/#articlecontent>

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