

Keeping it real: an education program where the presenters are the power

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Abstract

The Spinal Education Awareness Team (SEAT) has shared road safety and injury prevention messages with more than 1.1 million children in the past 21 years.

SEAT is a service of the Spinal Injuries Association and our team of volunteer presenters, who all have paraplegia or quadriplegia, are the indisputable power behind the program.

The purpose of this paper is to share how SEAT is inspiring children aged four to 17 to stay safe on the roads: as drivers, passengers, pedestrians and cyclists.

SEAT's aim is to reduce spinal cord injuries in Queensland and with road trauma being the number one cause of all such injuries, and the most at-risk age group being from 15 to 30, changing the behaviours and attitudes of children towards road safety is crucial.

The paper will include details on the development and key messages of SEAT; methods used to inspire safety on our roads; and evaluation procedures, including the analysis of qualitative and quantitative data from presenters, teachers and, most importantly, students, as well as medical data demonstrating that spinal cord injuries are at an all-time low in Queensland, coinciding with the success of SEAT.

The paper will demonstrate that through an education program that "keeps it real", risky behaviours by young road users can be influenced.

Keywords

Prevention, road safety, personal, interactive

Introduction

More than 1.1 million children have been informed and inspired by the Spinal Education Awareness Team (SEAT), which has shared safety and injury prevention messages at primary and secondary schools around Queensland since 1987.

The team consists of men and women who all have paraplegia or quadriplegia, and who share their own personal stories about how they sustained their injuries – and how those injuries changed their lives forever.

They are motivated by one common goal: to help reduce the incidence of spinal cord injuries in Queensland – on the roads, in the water, on the sports field and in the great outdoors.

SEAT, which is accredited by Education Queensland and is the longest-running program of its kind in Australia, is a service of the Spinal Injuries Association, a not-for-profit organisation supporting people with a spinal cord injury to rebuild their lives; is dedicated to

promoting independence and equity; and is committed to preventing these devastating injuries from occurring. At present, prevention is the only cure for a spinal cord injury.

The most common age to sustain a spinal cord injury is between the ages of 15 and 30 (Queensland Spinal Cord Injuries Service (QSCIS) 2006) – so school students are in, or are fast approaching, this vulnerable period. They are the high risk road users that our SEAT presenters speak to. Their inexperience as drivers and their tendency to think they are “indestructible” and “bulletproof” is what our presenters showcase and challenge.

In Queensland, the majority of traumatic spinal cord injuries (nearly 40%) are typically sustained as a result of road trauma, followed by falls/crashes and water-related accidents (QSCIS 2006).

Throughout Australia in 2005-2006, transport-related injuries represented 46% of all traumatic spinal cord injuries (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare: Cripps, R A 2007).

The messages of the SEAT program reflect these causes with the majority of each presentation, especially for senior students, therefore dedicated to motivating them to stay safe on the road as a driver of motor vehicles and motorbikes; a passenger on either; or a pedestrian; or a cyclist.

Methods

It was a Friday night and a group of friends were at a party. Seventeen-year-old Wayne Horkings was the youngest of the group and the designated driver. He didn't mind; he was never interested in alcohol. He just wanted to have some fun with his mates. Driving from one party to the next, Wayne stopped to go to the toilet and on his return, someone else was behind the wheel. He protested but the others told him not to worry; he felt pressured so, against his better judgement, he climbed into the back seat and put on his seat belt.

Not longer after, the car was travelling at 160km/hr. The driver lost control, missed a bend and they flew 150 metres over a cliff. It was five hours before help arrived.

The two people in the front of the car walked away relatively uninjured. Wayne's two mates in the back seat, who were not wearing their seat belts, died at the scene.

Wayne, who was wearing his seat belt, sustained a brain injury and broke his neck. He spent 115 nights in a coma and 4.5 years in hospital.

The silence in the room as Wayne tells his story, his speech still slurred as a result of his brain injury, is testimony to its power. So many vital messages are illustrated in this one real-life experience: the dangers of speeding, the dangers of driving while drunk or getting into the car with someone who has been drinking, the hazards of peer pressure and the life-saving importance of wearing a seat belt.

SEAT is an education program that “keeps it real” thanks to its presenters.

Few can argue with the credibility of a person using a wheelchair, sitting in front of young children from Prep through to Year 12, and bravely recounting how they sustained their injury and the realities of having a disability.

So many times we hear young teenagers rave about living hard and dying young. The threat of death as a result of road trauma doesn't seem to bother them. But what about living with a disability for the next 60+ years, where a stranger has to hoist you out of bed, shower you, take you to the toilet and feed and clothe you? Living for the rest of your life with a disability is the realistic shock factor that our presenters can share in personal and intimate detail.

Says SEAT presenter Ian Chill, a SEAT presenter and former Navy officer injured on a peacekeeping mission in the Solomon Islands, on SEAT's *Nobody's Bulletproof* DVD:

"At the time I wanted to die, I was in so much pain. The first two weeks in the ICU there, I was getting told that I'm never going to walk again, and that was just a mind blow. To think everything had changed so suddenly, so rapidly, that I'm never going to be able to run around with my kids, my family, or stand up and hold my wife again. I figured I had survived a lot of things in the Navy and done a lot of exciting things, got through injuries before. I thought I'd get up and walk away from this, but it wasn't to be. That was probably the hardest thing at the time, the realisation that I was never going to walk again.

"And then came the host of everything else that I'd lost as well. When you suffer a spinal cord injury and you're in a wheelchair, people think you just can't walk, but there's the loss of bladder and bowel control, the humiliation of having accidents in hospital was just horrendous. I was 39-years-old when I had my accident and you know, in control before that, and being a fairly solid, proud sort of fellow, and all of a sudden I've had all of that taken away and I've got a nurse taking me to the toilet, helping me clean up after a bowel accident or a bladder accident."

These stark words and images are the reality check that our presenters can provide so well.

Importantly, as much honesty that they all use, the presenters also use humour as it is important to reflect that life is not all "doom and gloom" with a spinal cord injury or a disability.

As long-time SEAT presenter Robert Spencer says:

"The kids hear safety messages all the time from their teachers, their parents and the media – they aren't going to listen if you tell them 'don't do this' and 'don't do that'. We try and make them laugh and make them relax about someone with a disability, and also reinforce these safety messages in a realistic context."

The Spinal Injuries Association is dedicated to empowering people with a disability to achieve anything and everything they wish to. In the same way, the SEAT presenters are dedicated to empowering students to stop and think about their behaviours.

In the primary school program, a multimedia presentation is used that is divided into three year levels. For Prep to Year 3, the presentation is called "Playing by the Rules"; for Years 4 to 5 it's called "Do the Right Thing"; and for Years 6 to 7, it's called "Taking Sensible Risks".

Some of the messages shared by the presenters with the children include the importance of wearing your seat belt: “Click Clack – Front and Back” and to always wear a bicycle helmet when riding a bike, skateboard or rollerskating.

Interaction with the audience is crucial. For primary school students, an animated character called Alex speaks with the children throughout the presentation. He’s a cool-looking kid – and he uses a wheelchair. He makes the kids laugh and plays games with them.

One of the scenarios used is a character called Katie who takes off her seat belt to reach for something in the glove box. As she does this, her mum who is driving the car has to brake suddenly for a dog on the road and Katie is thrown through the window, breaking her back. The students then see Katie’s journey as she spends time in hospital and has to learn all over again how to wash and dress herself and use the bathroom.

The presentation includes information about Katie spending time at the gym to strengthen her upper body and learning to play wheelchair basketball. The message that everything takes a lot longer now for Katie to do is emphasised.

For high school students, closer to the high risk road user category, the safety messages become blunt and bold.

Of our 16 presenters, seven were injured as a result of road trauma; the others were injured in water-related accidents, falls or sporting accidents – representative of the overall common range of causes for spinal cord injuries.

If the presenter was not injured in a road accident, they tell each other’s story to ensure a personal perspective is always shared.

To assist the presenters, a new DVD was launched in 2008 called *Nobody’s Bulletproof*. One of the four people profiled in the DVD is Amber VanDam, the youngest SEAT presenter at just 19.

She was injured days before her Year 12 exams after riding in the boot of a car. The driver lost control and crashed. Everyone jumped out – except Amber, who had broken her back. She provides a thoughtful and honest insight into her predicament.

“I was completely wrecked, I didn’t think there was any sort of life left for me to be 100% honest with you. I was shocked. I didn’t understand how it could have happened to me – how it could happen to anyone – but how it could have happened to me. I was scared and worried and yeah, very scared of what I was about to face.

“I spent about four months all up in the hospital ... it was like rebuilding your life all over again. So you went into the spinal unit and it was like you were a two-year-old. Not being able to do anything, so you’ve got to learn to re-do every little aspect of your life in a different way, so it was a lot of hard work, a lot of physical and mental strain the whole time you were in there, just trying to rebuild everything.

“Regret most? Umm ... getting in that boot. It was a split second I didn’t plan for, and it was only for a bit of fun and look where it’s got me. It’s changed everything about my life and it’s definitely my biggest regret. If only I had stopped to think for a second.

“The one piece of advice I would give is definitely get out there and live your life to the max, have the best fun and the best times but just do it sensibly and think about yourself and the other people around you. You never know what’s going to happen and you don’t want to put yourself in a position where things could be so much worse.”

Results

Nearly every day of the school calendar year, in school halls, libraries and classrooms in regional and metropolitan communities around the state, SEAT presenters are championing safe behaviours on our roads.

In the past four years, the program has grown with 25,251 students viewing SEAT in 2005 to 40,192 in 2006, 63,155 in 2007 and an expected 70,000+ students in 2008. With a 177% expected increase over this period, the program is confident that its messages are being disseminated.

But are the children listening? It is difficult to accurately ascertain the impact of these presentations. Much of it is subjective and with audiences ranging from groups as small as 20 students to as large as 2,000 on school assembly, the presenters can only sometimes see first-hand on the faces of the students whether they are having an impact.

As SEAT presenter Mark Farley says: *“The SEAT program has given new meaning to my life. I gain a real sense of achievement as a presenter. I can see almost instantly that I have made an impact and that the program does make a difference.”*

Another SEAT presenter Wayne Leo, who has been with the program since inception 21 years ago and has spoken with more than 225,000 children, says: *“If only one kid listens to me every year, and I save them from a life-time using a wheelchair, then I have done my job.”*

Without exception, SEAT presenters recognise their role as helping to motivate safe behaviours. As trainee SEAT presenter James Sprenger sums it up: *“Don’t wrap yourself up in bubblewrap but remember, you are not bulletproof.”*

The program sends out evaluation forms to every school and asks teachers to complete and return them. It is also requested that high school students are given the opportunity to provide feedback to allow the program to gauge its success and the presenters to learn and evolve.

In 2007, 129 responses were received from teachers, representing 32% of visits or around one in every three.

In response to the questions:

Did you find the SEAT presentation worthwhile?

100% of all respondents agreed.

Did the presentation effectively explain prevention of spinal injuries?

100% of all respondents agreed.

Would you recommend this program to other schools?

100% of all respondents agreed.

Respondents were then asked to rate areas of the program and choose one of five options: Poor, Average, Good, High Quality or Excellent.

Key questions were:

How would you rate the impact and effectiveness of the SEAT program on the participants?

78% of respondents chose the top two ratings: Excellent (34%) or High Quality (44%), with 22% nominating Good.

How would you rate the SEAT program?

87% of respondents chose the top two ratings: Excellent (42%) or High Quality (45%), with 13% nominating Good.

In 2007, for the first time, teachers were asked to source feedback from high school students. The students were asked if they would **change their behaviour** as a result of viewing the SEAT program.

Of the 278 responses:

84% said yes

5% were unsure

9% said no

1.5% said "will try"

Examples:

"Yes, I will be safer driving and being a passenger in a car and around mechanical equipment."

"The presentation made me think, really stop and think about my decisions, because for the first time I saw real people with real issues."

"I think I will be more careful about everything I do because I don't want to be disabled for the rest of my life."

"Just because I have my Ps, it doesn't make me bulletproof."

In response to being asked **what they learned** after viewing the SEAT program:

41.5% spoke about how important it was to "think before you act", "now aware of the consequences" and how "stupid decisions can change your life"

20.5% spoke how they were amazed at how easy a spinal cord injury could happen and how it could happen to anyone, including young people

14% spoke how they learned about the types and causes of spinal cord injuries

13.5% spoke about how they learned to be safe and be more careful, especially on the road

10.5% said they learned about how people with a disability live

Examples:

“I learned that it is so easy to damage yourself so permanently.”

“I learnt that car accidents can happen to anyone. You always hear about the people who die but never the ones with life altering injuries ... after seeing a real-life example, it alters your view just that bit more.”

“Shows us how selfish we are sometimes by not caring about the outcome of some silly actions ie. drink driving.”

“I took in a great deal of information and if I took a quick risk assessment, I’d be far better off than if I hadn’t listened.”

“It has inspired me to do less dangerous tricks on my bike.”

While primary school students are not asked to complete an evaluation form, they often draw pictures about the SEAT presenters and their main messages, illustrating the impact and accuracy of the safety messages.

For example:

“Dear Wayne and James. Thank you for coming to our school. I learnt a lot. I always wear a seat belt and tell my brother as well. And I always check the depth of the water. I will never rock somebody off a chair. Thank you for the stickers. I will wear a helmet (sic) every (sic) time I ride my bike.” See Appendix A.

This message highlights how children are also great agents of change with this young artist ensuring he will “tell my brother as well”. Our SEAT presenters purposefully encourage the children, mostly those at primary school level, to share their new-found knowledge with their parents, siblings and friends. In this way, the SEAT messages are being shared in the greater community.

A teacher at Warwick State School wrote last year:

“The children thoroughly enjoyed the program. It has heightened their awareness about spinal injuries. Several children have shared their knowledge with their families. Parents have also said how good it was to have their children made aware of safety in these areas.”

In addition to this qualitative and quantitative data, Queensland has gone from the worst state in Australia for spinal cord injuries 10 years ago to sharing second lowest status today. See Appendix B.

Still, on average, 88 spinal cord injuries happen every year (QSCIS 2006) and with approximately 40% being due to road trauma, that is 35 people who will have paraplegia or quadriplegia for the rest of their lives.

Another measure of SEAT's success is that the program is frequently called upon to provide speakers for other road safety programs to complement what is being offered by these initiatives. A personal perspective of surviving a life-changing road trauma is considered a powerful and compelling deterrent, particularly to high risk road users.

This year alone, SEAT presenters have been invited to speak at various new and long-established road safety initiatives including:

- Docudramas coordinated by Barry Colless
- The Rocky Horror Road Show Year 12 Harm minimisation project, coordinated by the Ipswich District Crime Prevention Unit
- The Gold Coast Traffic Offenders Program
- The U-Turn program of the Rockhampton Youth Justice Service
- Attitudinal Driving workshops in Ipswich, run by the Queensland Police Service
- The Drive Alive program
- The Rotary Youth Driver Awareness (RYDA) program

SEAT is delighted to collaborate with these programs as it reinforces that our "keep it real" approach is recognised as a value-add to the practical and theoretical components of other programs.

Typically, SEAT's busiest months are in October and November. In November 2007, 14,233 students viewed the program and 9,350 in October, representing 37% of students seen throughout the entire year.

This period coincides with the end of the school year when it is clear that students are looking forward to either leaving school or the summer holidays – a period when spinal cord injuries as a result of road trauma can be particularly prevalent.

SEAT has grown from a program where three presenters visited schools largely in south-east Queensland to 14 presenters, plus two trainee presenters, currently working throughout Brisbane, as well as the Gold Coast, Stanthorpe, Toowoomba, Hervey Bay, Yeppoon, Ayr and Cairns. Schools visited in 2007 included those throughout regional Queensland with special two-week itineraries planned on several occasions for one of the Brisbane-based presenters.

Another new development has been to leave material with students which contain safety messages. Currently, L-plate stickers with the message "Seat belts save lives" are being developed and will be presented to Year 12 students later this year.

Last year, special stickers were created for primary school students using fun “egg” characters with messages such as: “Use your egg, remember to wear your helmet” and “Our shells are fragile, use your seat belt”. See Appendix C.

It is imperative that we continue to reach out to students with personal testimonies about the consequences of high risk behaviour on our roads.

Integral to the success of the SEAT program is the interaction between the presenter and the students. Incorporating a question and answer period into every 40-minute presentation is often the most poignant period with the presenters challenging the students to ask “whatever you like”. For primary school students, this might be: “How do you sleep in your wheelchair in bed?” and for high school students, this might be: “Can you still have sex?”.

Ayr-based SEAT presenter Scott Stidston judges the effectiveness and impact of his own presentations by the number of questions asked:

“I absolutely love speaking with the students. It doesn’t matter whether it’s a group of pre-schoolers or a group of young adults in Year 12, I come away from each presentation on a high, especially if the students have asked a lot of questions.

“I don’t think there is any question that I haven’t heard at least once. If I do get a question that no one has asked previously, I congratulate the student and let them know that they are the first to ask that particular question.”

A Townsville-based teacher who has viewed many of Scott’s presentations over the years, wrote a reference for Scott to be nominated for a Disability Action Week Award this year.

She wrote in part: “Scott earns the students’ respect immediately by making everyone feel at ease with his disability and by having a wonderful sense of humour. Several of our students stayed on with Scott after his formal presentation this year for more than 45 minutes, sharing their own “near miss” stories and asking more questions about living with a disability.

“SEAT’s message from Scott was loud and clear, ‘think before you act’ and make the right decision before the wrong decision could change your life in the blink of an eye.”

As much as the program empowers our presenters to get back into the community and help stop spinal cord injuries from happening, the results also serve to introduce young people in Queensland to a small group of inspiring people who have overcome great challenges and are now dedicated to stopping others from having similar experiences. The respect they gain from students and teachers is integral to their success.

Their own stories are motivating – so who better to motivate young people to drive safe and be safe.

Conclusion

The high risk road users that SEAT presenters speak to almost every day of the school year are young drivers or passengers who are typically difficult to motivate given the cavalier approach to life that many people in this age group have. They think they are “bulletproof” and our presenters are dedicated to proving that is not so – nobody is bulletproof.

By keeping it real, with honesty and humour, not even the most disruptive student dares to confront someone who has shared such a personal account of what has happened to them, ensuring the presenters are effective advocates for change.

The dedicated men and women who make up the SEAT program – who are all volunteers – will continue to reach out to as many students as possible each year with their own stories and accounts of the life-changing consequences of unsafe behaviour on our roads.

Their goal will never change: to stop young people from being injured and facing a lifetime with a disability.

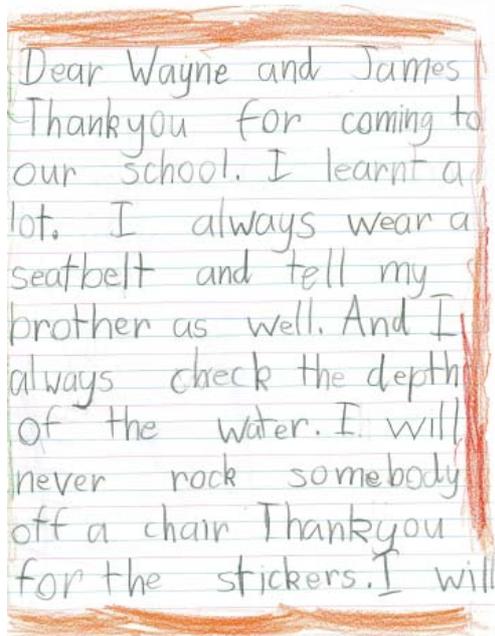
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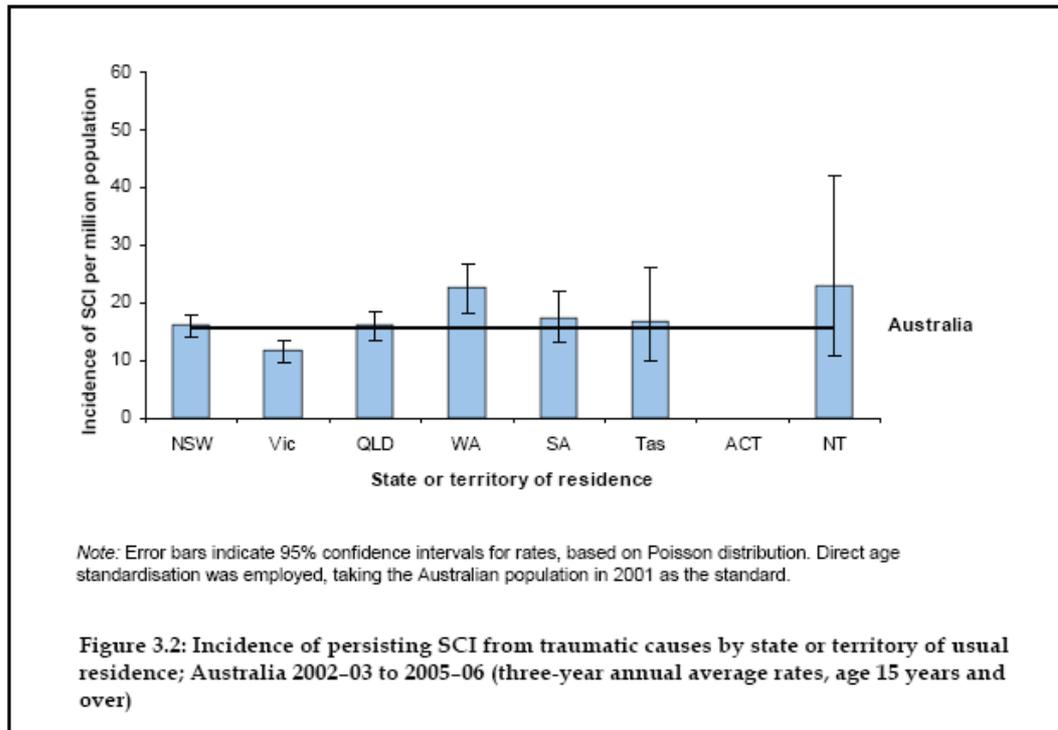
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Appendices

Appendix A:



Appendix B:



Appendix C:

