

# Contributed Articles

## Road Safety Is No Accident

### About the author

*Dr Jiggins is an Associate Fellow of the College and Secretary of the ACT and Region Chapter. He has recently been awarded a Churchill Fellowship to study the reporting of road crashes in the print media. The Fellowship was sponsored by the NRMA-ACT Road Safety Trust. Feedback on this paper is welcome: [stevejiggins@bigpond.com](mailto:stevejiggins@bigpond.com)*



The Australian news media typically portrays road crashes as “accidents” involving human tragedy. The pattern is all too familiar: scenes of mangled wreckage, an ambulance leaving the scene, an interview with emergency service personnel who describe the crash as “the worst they have seen”.

We might ask “What’s the take-out message from this sort of coverage?”

An accident, by definition, is an unpredictable event beyond the control of the individual – according to the dictionary “an incident that happens by chance or without apparent cause”. Overseas researchers argue that describing crashes as “accidents” fails to convey important safety information and potentially builds barriers which may block or inhibit the adoption of road safety countermeasures.

In 2004, for the first time in the history of the World Health Organisation, World Health Day focused on the theme of road safety. Road traffic “collisions” – as WHO prefers to call them - kill more than 1.2 million people a year around the world, but are largely neglected as a health issue, perhaps because they are still viewed by many as events which are beyond our control. Yet the risks are known: speeding, alcohol, non-use of helmets, seat belts and other restraints, poor road design, poor enforcement of road safety regulations, unsafe vehicle design, and poor emergency health services.

Another interesting feature of the Australian media’s reporting of road crashes in the preoccupation with the “road toll” – an issue that receives extensive reporting in the Australian media but is less common in overseas coverage of road fatalities.

A study by the Australian Transport Safety Bureau in 2006 [1] examined annual trends in road fatality numbers for Christmas and Easter holiday periods. In contrast to media reporting on the issue, the analysis of average number of deaths per day found that fatality rates during holiday periods were not systematically higher or lower than fatality rates at other times of the year. The study also found no evidence of any change in the involvement of primary causal factors (speeding, alcohol or fatigue). The findings are broadly consistent with the results of a similar study undertaken in 2003.

The concept of a “toll” implies a tax or duty that must be paid. It could be seen that the holiday death toll is simply the cost that the community must pay for the use of our road network. This is in stark contrast to an emerging philosophy called Vision Zero which has its roots in Sweden.

Vision Zero is a road safety philosophy with the aim that, eventually, no one will be killed or seriously injured within the road transport system. In October 1997, the Road Traffic Safety Bill founded on Vision Zero was passed by a large majority in the Swedish parliament (Ministry of Transport and Communications, 1997) [2]. The Vision is an expression of the ethical imperative that

It can never be ethically acceptable that people are killed or seriously injured when moving within the road transport system (Tingvall and Haworth, 1999) [3]

As noted by Swedish road safety expert Claes Tingvall, Vision Zero provides a vision of a safe road transport system which can be used to guide the selection of strategies and then the setting of goals and targets. Zero is not a target to be achieved by a certain date. It is a change from an emphasis on current problems and possible ways of reducing these to being guided by what the optimum state of the road transport system should be.

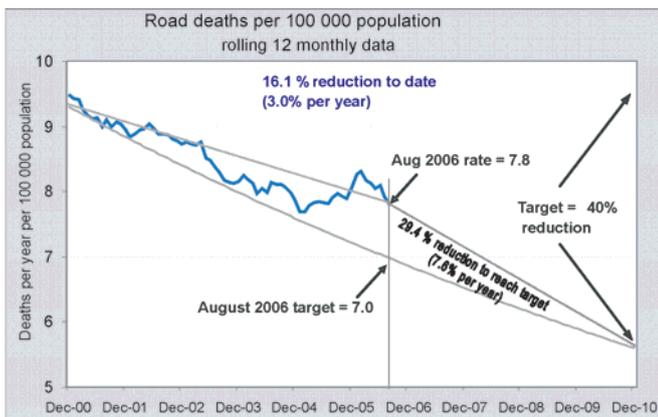
Vision Zero also changes the emphasis in responsibility for road traffic safety. In all current road transport systems, the road user has almost total responsibility for safety. In most countries, there are general rules that the road user should behave in such a way that crashes are avoided. If a crash occurs, at least one road user has, by definition, broken a general rule and the legal system can therefore act.

The results in Sweden have been dramatic with fatalities on Swedish roads falling from 541 in 1997 to 431 in 2006 and a fatality rate that is amongst the lowest in the OECD.

### Why bother?

Well Australia is not Sweden and we may not have the financial resources to embrace the investment in infrastructure that Vision Zero would require. However, road safety professionals and emergency service workers are missing opportunities to promote road safety messages under the current media driven emphasis on the human drama associated with road traffic “accidents.”

As shown in Graph 1 taken from the National Road Safety Action Plan 2007 and 2008 [4], the level of road safety performance in Australia has hit a plateau and there is a widening gap between actual crash rates and those proposed under the National Road Safety Strategy agreed by Transport Ministers in November 2000.



*Graph 1*

### *The National Road Safety Action Plan 2007 and 2008*

acknowledges that road safety is a community health and welfare issue and road safety measures need to be supported and accepted by the public. The Plan calls for improved public understanding of the road trauma impacts on livelihood and lifestyle, the research basis for growing problems such as driver-distraction, and the benefits of expenditure on safer roads.

The Plan also notes there has been a tendency in some areas of motoring journalism to attempt to undermine speed management and other safety interventions. The plan argues it is important to establish stronger links with this sector to promote sound understanding of the scientific and research basis for road safety interventions.

### What can be done?

The first step towards engaging the media is to understand how it works. A technique called 'Media Framing' provides a basis for examining newspaper content in terms of what the media typically include in their coverage of certain issues and, equally importantly, what they choose to ignore.

Framing examines how journalists and editors 'package' information for their audiences and how that information is presented. In the print news media, the headline is usually pivotal because it provides an instant summary of the story and at the same time locates it within certain reference points for the reader (such as the 'horse race' in the coverage of political matters). Cartoons are also indicators of what is at stake in news reports and point to the existence of particular types of media frames.

Newspapers typically present fatal crashes as dramas with a victim/villain storyline; in keeping with this narrative strategy, newspapers are most likely to cover stories where a driver survived to take the blame. By highlighting crashes that diverge from the norm, focusing on the assignment of blame to a single party, and failing to convey the message that preventive practices like seatbelt use increase odds for survival, newspapers removed crashes from a public health context and positioned them as individual issues.

Connor and Wesolowski (2004) [5] examined the public health messages conveyed by newspaper coverage of fatal motor vehicle crashes and determine the extent to which press coverage accurately reflects real risks and crash trends. Crash details were extracted from two years of newspaper coverage of fatal crashes in four Midwestern cities in the United States. Details and causal factors identified by reporters were compared to data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS). The newspapers covered 278 fatal crashes over the two year period, in contrast to 846 fatal crashes documented in FARS. Newspapers assigned blame in 90% of crashes covered, under-reported restraint use and driver's risk of death, failed to reflect the protective value of restraints, and misrepresented the roles played by alcohol and teen drivers. The study found newspaper coverage did not accurately reflect real risk.

Commentary on road crashes is eagerly sought by the media. These contacts provide police and other road safety commentators with an opportunity to redress the imbalance in reporting and to push important safety messages.

Police and other road safety professionals could try and place less emphasis on the human drama of the crash and focus on broader safety messages. For example, a crash involving a novice driver and a carload of passengers could be used to make the following points:

- Novice drivers are over-represented in crash data by a ratio of at least 3:1.
- Young drivers generally use less safe older vehicles because they are more affordable, hence injury risk in a crash is higher.
- Young driver crash rates are elevated sharply when they drive late at night and during early morning hours and when carrying two or more passengers; and
- That is why road safety authorities are examining curfews and passenger restrictions for this group (National Road Safety Action Plan 2007 and 2008) [4].

These comments do not go to the causal factors of the particular crash but highlight a broader pattern and set an agenda in terms of possible counter-measures.

Similarly, a crash involving a motorcycle could point to the following messages:

- Motorcyclists face a fatal crash risk about 20 times higher than drivers; their relative risk of serious injury is even higher.
- Over 40 per cent of fatal motorcycle crashes are single-vehicle crashes.
- The severity of injuries faced by motorcyclists is higher than for other road user groups.
- Potential riders should consider carefully the purchase of a motorcycle particularly if the decision is lifestyle based.
- Riders should undertake specialist courses to mitigate the higher risks they face.
- Promote to riders the safety advantages of ABS and linked braking systems in motorcycles.

## Where to from here?

There is some guidance available from another area of public health. Researchers found that media portrayals of mental illness and suicide perpetuated a number of community myths about these problems. The Mindframe Media and Mental Health Project [6] aims to build a collaborative relationship with the Australian media and mental health systems to enable a more accurate and sensitive portrayal of suicide and mental health issues. Key activities undertaken by the Project include:

- the development of a resource kit for use by media professionals including the companion website; and
- delivery of face-to-face briefings with a diverse range of media organisations providing opportunity for discussion on issues to consider when reporting.

The print and web based resources are designed to help media professionals continue to report suicide and mental illness responsibly and accurately (see <http://www.mindframe-media.info/site/index.cfm?display=85542>).

Police, road safety authorities and the media could work together in a similar fashion to develop media resources to assist journalists in their reporting of road crashes. Consideration could be given to the development of guidelines that would assist both police and the media. The current National Road Safety Action Plan 2007 and 2008 provides a good foundation for such work. The College is well placed to coordinate the development of guidelines and to post these and other resources on our website.

Given that the social cost of road crashes has been estimated by the Bureau of Transport and Regional Economics at \$15 billion per annum [7], we need to do more to reduce this trauma.

It is time for paradigm change to encourage the community to look at road crashes as a public health issue and to move away from the media's pre-occupation with the human drama associated with road crashes.

## References

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