

Contributed Articles

Speech by His Excellency Major General Michael Jeffery AC CVO MC (Retd), Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia

**On the occasion of the Reception for the Australasian College of Road Safety and
Presentation of the College's 2006 Fellowship Award to Lauchlan McIntosh, Government
House, Wednesday 4th October 2006**

“Ms Kerry Fitzgerald, President, Australasian College of Road Safety and Mr Warwick Grigg, Mr Lauchlan McIntosh, Executive Director, Australian Automobile Association and Mrs Lynda McIntosh, Members of the College Executive, Ladies and Gentlemen

Welcome to Government House this evening. I am especially pleased to welcome members of the College, to learn more about your outstanding work, to encourage your ongoing contribution to our national life, and to emphasise how crucial it is.

Road safety is extraordinarily complex. But as I see it there are three critical issues:

- encouraging manufacturers to build and people to buy the safest vehicles in the market;
- building roads to a high standard and eliminating high risk elements in existing roads; and
- investigating and improving driving behaviour.

As a former military commander, this systems approach is applied to preparing soldiers for battle - ensuring they have the very best of training, have access to the very best equipment, and that they are deployed by the safest means of transport possible.

Sadly, road deaths and injury continue at staggering levels. Even one road death a day is too much and yet we are now confronted with a national average of five deaths a day on our roads. An even greater number of people suffer very serious injuries, paraplegia, limb amputation, and brain damage. That 60 people a day are seriously injured on our roads is an awful fact. Take the mortality rate alone - if a similar statistic applied to Australians in battle, the public outcry would galvanise the country into action.

We may well have the world's eleventh lowest rate of road deaths in proportion to population numbers, the ninth lowest in terms of registered vehicles and the fourth lowest in relation to vehicle kilometres travelled, but this is no cause for complacency. Far from it; we should be aiming for the lowest.

Global figures, and indeed our national statistics, simply show how profound is the challenge of improving road safety. It is worth noting that from 1970 until 2002 the road fatality rate in Australia dropped from 30.4 to 8.8 deaths per 100,000 population. This reduction was achieved in spite of a huge increase in motor vehicle use.

The introduction of seat belts, improved car design, improved road design and maintenance, driver education, air bags, and a heightened awareness of the dangers of drink driving, are amongst the factors that have helped to lower the statistics. But again there is no cause for complacency.

What is disappointing is that the road toll is now starting to trend upwards and we may not meet the National Road Safety Strategy for 2010 of reducing road trauma to 5.6 road deaths per 100,000.

One of the big issues for road safety is speed. Most drivers travel above set speed limits, and it seems the elements of speed and power are still selling points for new vehicles – features that inevitably appeal to the aspirational 18 to 25 year old drivers - unfortunately the highest risk category in road crash statistics

I know that a Voluntary Code of Practice for Advertising New Vehicle Models has been developed, however there seems to be ongoing friction between road safety authorities and the vehicle manufacturing industry on advertising power and speed in appealing to motorists. Perhaps we have to place greater emphasis on for example fuel efficiency and good engineering.

In terms of driver behaviour and community attitudes – the critical challenge is to get most drivers to slow down. The ACT has a high standard of road systems, a pool of relatively new cars and a highly educated population.

However despite this combination of 'choice factors', the majority of crashes are 'rear-enders' – people travelling too close and at too great a speed. Why is this? I think it tells us that attitudes behind the wheel are formed by personal choice, often based on ignorance, haste and selfishness.

Significant reduction in road accidents would occur if speed limits better reflected the road environment.

Monash University's Accident Research Centre conducted a study five months after the introduction of a state-wide general urban speed limit of 50 km/h. The study showed:

- a 13 per cent reduction in all serious casualty crashes involving all road users;
- a 22 per cent reduction in casualty crashes involving pedestrians; and
- a 40-46 per cent reduction in serious pedestrian casualty crashes that required admission to hospital.

What a small price to pay for such significant results. The big challenge is communicating this to the population. But the community still receives mixed messages. Many still hold perceptions of speed cameras linked to 'revenue raising'; current affairs programs continue to churn over old ground reporting inaccuracies in speed camera operations.

Then there are the powerful mental and physical messages about the sexual attraction and power dynamics linked to fast car ownership, which appeal to potential young drivers and continue to be reinforced everyday through TV and print media advertising.

Australia's road network is vast, so much so that we are not going to be able to transform it overnight. The reality for our roads – be they 0 to 5 star rated – is that there is no quick fix ahead. I support the concept of ensuring more 'forgiving' road systems.

This includes the 'Road Safety Risk Manager' technology which assesses road conditions and helps rank priorities - enabling engineers and authorities to best allocate available funds to the highest priorities - for example by installing guard rails, shoulder realignments and upgradings, or removing trees or similar danger points.

We must continue working on community attitudes. Is there value in introducing a national accreditation scheme for driving instructors? Whilst there is contradictory argument about the merits of this, I am strongly of the view that driving instruction programs must do more than simply instruct in the mechanics of driving.

Is there not room to tackle the matter of respect for other drivers, of developing a program that taps into good driving role models? How do we build a strong national culture of the essentiality of good behaviour on our roads?

There is no silver bullet for the problem of reducing road trauma, though it's not all doom and gloom. The contributions of the College and kindred motoring and road safety organisations have triggered the dramatic drop in per capita crash rates in Australia over the past 30 years. Indeed most of you in this room have had a significant role to play in achieving these results.

We need to keep working at this. And we need to comprehensively impart the excellent philosophy espoused by the Australasian College of Road Safety - that obtaining a licence is just the beginning of a life time driving learning process.

Ladies and gentlemen. I am delighted to have been asked to present the College's 2006 Fellowship Award to Lauchlan McIntosh. Lauchlan retires this year as Executive Director of the Australian Automobile Association.

But more than that, he has given outstanding service and leadership in national and international advocacy for members of motoring clubs and associations.

He has lobbied nationally and internationally on new car safety assessment, road safety, risk assessment of the national highway system, improving road infrastructure and road engineering programs. He introduced the very successful 'Think Before You Drive' campaign in Australia in conjunction with Bridgestone.

His enthusiasm, his knowledge and his leadership have played a major role in reducing road trauma in Australia. And thus it is my great pleasure to present the 2006 Fellowship to Lauchlan McIntosh."

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Now in its third reprint, this manual was written for students in tertiary courses in Traffic Safety at Australian Universities and in Police Academies. The text is recommended also for specialists working in Traffic Safety who wish to become more familiar with broader issues in this multidisciplinary profession.

The contents and authors are as follows:

- The Past: Hit and Miss (Jennifer Clark, University of New England)
- The Driver: The Psychology of Road Safety (R F Soames Job, University of Sydney)
- The Vehicle: Automotive Engineering (Chris Coxon, S.A. Department of Transport)
- The Environment: Road Engineering (Peter Moses, Consultant, Western Australia)
- The Environment: Transport Economics and Planning (Michael A P Taylor, University of South Australia)
- The Environment: Traffic Management (Angus Witherby, University of New England)
- The Future: Whither Traffic Safety? (Colin Grigg, Consultant, New South Wales)

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