



Bicycle Network Mandatory Helmet Review

Opinion of

Prof Chris Oliver

Physical Activity for Health Research Centre, University of Edinburgh

c.w.oliver@ed.ac.uk

<https://cyclingsurgeon.bike/>

Consultant Trauma Orthopaedic Hand Surgeon, Royal Infirmary Edinburgh

Twitter **@CyclingSurgeon**

1. *Do you believe it should be mandatory to wear a helmet when riding a bicycle? (If you believe it should be mandatory at some times but not others please describe when.)*

No – you should wear a helmet if you wish to. The law should not be mandatory.

2. *What's your reasons for your answer to question one?*

- I agree with Cycling UK Headline Messages for helmets and all the statements below. I was previously chairman of Cycling UK Scotland 2012-2014
- Cycling UK is opposed to both cycle helmet laws and to helmet promotion campaigns because these are almost certainly detrimental to public health. Evidence shows that the health benefits of cycling are so much greater than the relatively low risks involved, that even if these measures caused only a very small reduction in cycle use, this would still almost certainly mean far more lives being lost through physical inactivity than helmets could possibly save, however effective.
- In any case, there are serious doubts about the effectiveness of helmets. They are, and can only be, designed to withstand minor knocks and falls, not serious traffic collisions. Some evidence suggests they may in fact increase the risk of cyclists having falls or collisions in the first place, or suffering neck injuries.
- Neither enforced helmet laws nor promotion campaigns have been shown to reduce serious head injuries, except by reducing cycling. The remaining cyclists do not gain any detectable reduction in risk, and they may lose some of the benefits from 'safety in numbers'.
- So instead of focusing on helmets, health and road safety professionals and others should promote cycling as a safe, normal,

Making bike riding easy for everyone

Level 4, 246 Bourke Street
Melbourne VIC 3000

234 Crown Street
Darlinghurst NSW 2010

210 Collins Street
Hobart TAS 7000

Suite 5, 18-20 Cavenagh
Street Darwin NT 0800



aspirational and enjoyable activity, using helmet-free role-models and imagery. Individual cyclists may sometimes choose to use helmets, either for confidence or because of the type of cycling they are doing. However, they should not feel under any pressure to wear them. For the sake of our health, it is more important to encourage people of all ages to cycle, than to make an issue of whether they use a helmet when doing so.

Key facts:

- In the UK, the life years gained due to cycling's health benefits outweigh the life-years lost through injuries by around 20:1. Mile for mile, the slim chances of being killed whilst cycling are about the same as those for walking, and on average, one cyclist is killed on Britain's roads for every 29 million miles travelled by cycle.
- Enforced helmet laws have consistently caused substantial reductions in cycle use (e.g. 30-40% in Perth, Western Australia). They have also increased the proportion of the remaining cyclists who wear helmets, yet the safety of these cyclists has not improved relative to other road user groups (e.g. in New Zealand).
- Even if helmets could prevent all cyclist injuries (including non-head injuries), a UK helmet law would only have to reduce the level of cycle use by about 4.7% to shorten more lives through inactivity than helmets themselves could possibly save.
- Standards only require cycle helmets to withstand the sort of impact that a rider is likely to suffer if they fall from their cycle from a stationary position (about 12 mph). They are not and cannot be designed to withstand impacts with faster-moving cars, let alone lorries.
- Cycling typically accounts for 7-8% of the head injuries for which children are admitted to English hospitals – just a quarter of these to parts of the head that a helmet might protect.

Cycling UK View (formal statement of Cycling UK's policy):

- Government and other bodies concerned with health or road safety should simply aim to encourage people to cycle, regardless of whether or not they choose to wear helmets when doing so.
- Enforced helmet laws cause deep and enduring reductions in cycle use, undermining its very substantial health and other benefits. Given that the risks of cycling are low – they are not greatly different from those of walking or other forms of active recreation – even a very small reduction in cycle use would be counter-productive to health and other public policy objectives, regardless of the effectiveness or otherwise of helmets. In practice, this disbenefit is potentially very substantial, not

Making bike riding easy for everyone

Level 4, 246 Bourke Street
Melbourne VIC 3000

234 Crown Street
Darlinghurst NSW 2010

210 Collins Street
Hobart TAS 7000

Suite 5, 18-20 Cavenagh
Street Darwin NT 0800



least because the deterrent effect is likely to be strongest among key target groups for physical activity promotion, e.g. women, teenagers, less well-off communities and ethnic minority groups.

- Cycle helmets have in any case not been shown to be an effective way to reduce cyclists' injury risks. Indeed they might even be counter-productive, by encouraging drivers or cyclists to behave less cautiously, and/or by increasing the risks of neck and other injuries. By deterring people from cycling, they may also reduce the benefits that cyclists gain from 'safety in numbers'.
- In the UK enforcing helmet laws would require levels of police activity that would be grossly disproportionate to any possible benefits. Conversely, unenforced helmet laws make no long-term difference to helmet use, and therefore cannot provide benefits in any case.
- Road safety policies should prioritise measures that reduce the risks that deter people from cycling – traffic speeds, hostile roads and junctions, dangerous or irresponsible driving, and lorries – and offering high quality cycle training for people of all ages, to give them the confidence and skills to ride safely on the roads.
- Individuals should be free to make their own decisions about whether or not to wear helmets, with parents making these decisions in the case of younger children. Their decisions should be informed by clear information about the uncertainties over the benefits or otherwise of helmets.
- Cycling UK supports politicians, celebrities and other role-models who choose to cycle un-helmeted. Far from "acting irresponsibly", they help to boost the perception of cycling as a normal, safe, aspirational and stylish activity that anyone can do in whatever clothes they normally be wear.
- Schools, employers and the organisers of non-sporting cycling events (e.g. sponsored rides) should not impose helmet rules for their pupils, staff and participants respectively. These rules are not justified in terms of health and safety, they are likely to reduce both the numbers and the diversity of people who take part in cycling, and they may in some circumstances be illegal.
- There is limited evidence on the risks involved in different types of off-road recreational cycling (from family riding to downhill mountain biking etc) and cycle sport. Likewise, evidence on the potential for helmet use to mitigate (or exacerbate) these risks is equally limited. These are in any case not matters for road safety policy.
- For sporting events, Cycling UK recognises the right of governing bodies to require the wearing of helmets in line with their own and

Making bike riding easy for everyone

Level 4, 246 Bourke Street
Melbourne VIC 3000

234 Crown Street
Darlinghurst NSW 2010

210 Collins Street
Hobart TAS 7000

Suite 5, 18-20 Cavenagh
Street Darwin NT 0800



international regulations for these events, given the different types of risk to which sport cyclists are exposed.

3. *Do you provide consent for your opinion to be made public?*

Yes certainly

The mandatory wearing of cycle helmets is daft, and is driven by ignorant uninformed politicians.

4. *If no, are you happy if we say you provided an opinion but didn't want it made publicly available?*

N/A

*Signed: Prof Chris Oliver, University of Edinburgh + Royal Infirmary
Edinburgh Twitter @CyclingSurgeon Web CyclingSurgeon.Bike*

Chris Oliver

Date: 21st Sept 2017

Please send completed form to craig@bicyclenetwork.com.au before 5pm, Friday 13 October, 2017.

Making bike riding easy for everyone

Level 4, 246 Bourke Street
Melbourne VIC 3000

234 Crown Street
Darlinghurst NSW 2010

210 Collins Street
Hobart TAS 7000

Suite 5, 18-20 Cavenagh
Street Darwin NT 0800

Freecall: 1800 639 634
bicyclenetwork.com.au