

Bicycle Network Mandatory Helmet Review

Opinion of Dr Robert Teunisse, president, Townsville Bicycle User Group

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

This is my personal opinion, not an official position of The Townsville Bicycle User Group

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

It is important to acknowledge the fact that helmets improve safety for cyclists by reducing the risk of serious head injury. It appears that the debate ends right there for a large proportion of people with an opinion, but it is important to continue it with a question: Do helmets reduce the risk of serious head injuries for drivers or passengers in cars? If so, should wearing a helmet in a car be mandatory? If not, why do rally and race car drivers wear helmets?

*I do not propose mandatory car helmets, but I do wish people realise “**there is more to it**”.*

How many people are having this debate with the image of a Lycra clad road cyclist or a mountainbiker in mind? There are many benefits engaging in sport for the individual. Helmet use in any level of cycling for sport or fitness is well established and usually demanded by other participants or organisers.

It appears people have trouble visualising cycling ‘to get somewhere’ whether this is for commuting, recreation, visiting a friend or doing shopping, generally at speeds far less than 20kph. It is this form of bicycle use that is the most beneficial form of transport to both individuals and the community in terms of health, economy and city livability. I understand this group to be a minority in a debate dominated by sport cyclists.

It is important to understand that I grew up in the Netherlands: getting around by bicycle. No Lycra, no helmet, but, if you are lucky, a girlfriend with her arms around your waist on the back rack. Not racing bikes, but sturdy steel single speed work horses wide tyres (35 not 25) with 60psi instead of 120. I was about 22yrs old when I

went for my drivers licence and had my first car at 24. I have come to realise this understanding of normal is quite different from the average Australian view. However, it is my kind of 'normal' cycling that saves the Netherlands about 20 billion dollars annually in healthcare cost alone.

Australia needs this kind of savings, no debate. State and national government make an effort to boost uptake of cycling. The Netherlands and Denmark (Copenhagen in particular) are world leaders in designing for bicycle traffic. Many cities around the world are striving to copy their success. Amongst them Australia and New Zealand are the only 2 countries with a mandatory helmet law. Why have other countries considered, but rejected it?

As cycling to get around is being promoted it is important to consider what people want to get around for. I would like for my wife and I to take our bicycle to town or theatre, but she refuses as a helmet ruins her hair. Whatever opinions you have about my wife's safety or standard of appearance, she is living proof that the mandatory helmet law discourages bicycle use where it could prevent another car on the road.

As I understand there are two questions in this debate:

"If something is safer, should it therefore be mandatory?"

And

"Does 'majority habit' dictate minority rule?"

I outrightly reject the 'reversed guilt' line in that an injuring driver would feel worse if the cyclist suffered more injury because of not wearing a helmet. In my opinion, the driver should feel guilty for failing to safeguard a vulnerable road user by slowing down or maintaining adequate distance. The severity of injury should have no influence, the possibility is sufficient. In addition, the people in charge of designing the infrastructure where the 'accident' occurred should feel guilt and review the area for possible improvements. Presumed liability law would change much more in this area than a mandatory helmet law.

The not so official position of the Townsville Bicycle User Group is that this debate is not important at this stage. The main barrier to uptake of commuting or normal cycling is the perceived lack of infrastructure safety (Queensland Cycling Strategy 2017). Structural efforts need to be made to encourage people to swap their car habit for a cycling habit. The more normalised getting around on a bicycle becomes, the more likely mandatory helmet laws will fade into obscurity.

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

Yes

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

Yes No

Signed:

Date:

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized initial 'R' followed by a horizontal line with a slight upward curve at the end.

16/10/2017