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23 SEP 2005

Mr Avery Burdett
Ontario Coalition for Better Cycling
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Dear Mr Burdett

COMPULSORY BICYCLE HELMETS

The Minister for Planning and Infrastructure, Hon Alannah MacTiernan MLA, has asked me to thank you for your 31 August 2005 correspondence regarding mandatory helmet-wearing for cyclists and to reply on her behalf.

From the introduction of mandatory helmet wearing in Australia, it has been argued by those opposed to the legislation that there is a potential trade-off between its effectiveness in reducing head injury and its impact on community health levels.

However, the argument that an unknown proportion of the community is so opposed to helmet wearing that they would cease cycling, which would result in a less healthy community, assumes that those people would not be engaged in an alternative physical activity.

Minister MacTiernan's comments, made when in Opposition, merely communicated this line of inconclusive argument to a parliamentary colleague.

In response to your request for more recent research that would support the concern expressed in the letter, we do not have sufficient health data to demonstrate the difference between the 'health' of people who cycle and those who do not, or if any variance could be attributed to cycling rather than other factors such as diet and lifestyle.

Neither do we have consistent data, from 1989 (pre-helmet legislation) to 2005, that shows the relationship between population growth, lifestyle trends, cycling participation and injury circumstance, that would enable reliable conclusions to be made about the impact of the legislation on community health.

We can, however, provide data from a cycling behaviour and attitudes tracking study, which has been ongoing in Western Australia since 1999, that uses an annual random survey of ≈400 adults (50% male / female split).

In response to questions designed to elicit reasons for not cycling, the response rate for 'compulsory helmets' ranged from a peak of 10% in one year (2000) to 1% in 2005, with a typical response range around 4%.

The report indicated a fairly even annual cycling participation level of between 30% and 38% over the same period.

As we do not have an equivalent measure prior to 1999, valid comparisons for cycling participation trends are difficult, particularly as lifestyle choices are becoming more sedentary, which has no relationship to compulsory helmet wearing for cyclists.

I hope this information is of assistance and appreciate you taking the time to bring your views to the attention of the Minister.

Yours sincerely



RICHARD FARRELL
ACHIEF OF STAFF