

THIRD PAGE

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Maybe we should wear helmets all of the time

COMMENTARY

Since I don't ride a bicycle anymore, I'm all in favour of city council's proposed helmet law. It's easy to support legislation that applies only to other people. Especially so if it's all about safety. Who could possibly be against safety? Of course, it's one thing to endorse safety. It's something else entirely to wear a dorky-looking helmet that leaves your hair all plastered down. This is the main impediment to helmet use. Everyone wants to be safe, but no one wants to look like a dork.

Not that protective headgear is necessarily dorky. Consider, for example, the helmets worn by fighter pilots or football players. These are almost flattering, especially on men with thinning hair. Helmets worn by cyclists, however, are as dorky as they can be. This is not by accident. Before they're approved for sale, bicycle helmets must meet strict standards established by the National Dork Council. Those that don't measure up are relabelled and sold as lampshades or spaghetti strainers.

Not too many people have heard of the National Dork Council. Based in Ottawa, it's a federally funded agency staffed by some of the country's leading dorks. Their influence belies their low profile. Besides bicycle helmets, the National

Dork Council sets standards for safety glasses, high school yearbook photos and middle-age white guys dancing.

Unfortunately, the Dork Council has no powers of enforcement. This is where city council steps in. Even now, a city council committee is drafting a bylaw to make helmets mandatory, not only for cyclists, but for anyone on a skateboard, in-line skates or a kick scooter. Whether the bylaw would apply to seniors riding around in MEDchairs is not clear. I doubt that it will. City councillors will not want to explain to such as my Aunt Mildred, who has worn her hair pinned up for 70 years, why she must now flatten her do under a helmet. If anyone needs a helmet, it's the people who get in her way.

Proponents of the law say helmets will reduce head injuries. And so they will, but perhaps not by as much as we might hope. That's because cycling accidents are not even close to being the leading cause of head injuries. This according to a definitive, 1998 study conducted at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont. Of all people admitted to Kingston hospitals that year with serious head injuries, less than nine per cent were hurt while cycling.

Falls caused almost four times as many head injuries as bicycle accidents. Why, then, is no one pushing for mandatory ladder-climbing helmets?

It's not just falling from heights. Tripping and falling on a level surface caused almost as many head injuries as bicycle crashes. Why, then, is no one calling for mandatory walking helmets.

More people suffered serious head injuries playing organized sports than riding bicycles. This even though most contact sports already require helmets. Maybe players should wear two helmets.

By far the biggest cause of head injuries is motor vehicle accidents. That's why race car drivers wear helmets. Why the rest of us drivers are not made to do so is for city council to explain, after they're through with the cyclists and roller skaters.

No one will be surprised to learn that head injuries are more than twice as common among men as compared to women. Here is solid, statistical justification for a bylaw requiring men to wear helmets at all times, except, perhaps, in bed. This reflects the small number of bed-related head injuries counted in the study. There were none. Even so, mandatory helmets might be a good idea for anyone sleeping in an upper bunk. Besides the risk of falling out of a high bunk, there is also the more serious danger of thumping your head on the ceiling.

Why take a chance. If city council is serious about reducing head injuries, we should all be

made to wear helmets at all times. Then we can officially change the name of our city to Dorkville.

How the proposed bylaw will be enforced, no one yet knows. Fining bare-headed cyclists and skateboarders is problematic since most of them are kids with no money. Confiscating their bikes and skateboards is an option only if the object is to promote early loathing of the law.

Another option is to put a helmet law on the books but not enforce it. Kids would interpret this to mean that cycling is risky, that a helmet is required and that laws are a joke.

Enforcing the law might have even worse consequences. My fear is that police will try to ticket some dopey kid for not wearing a helmet, the kid will flee, lose control of his bike, fall off and crack his skull. Then it's city councillors who will need helmets.



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