

Personal Submission to Vulnerable Road Users Enquiry

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I have been cycling on road for ten years in Canberra and have noticed that drivers are becoming more considerate but there is a small group that is becoming more aggressive towards cyclists. Unfortunately this type of behaviour is putting our lives at risk. Among many of the road rage incidents that I have been involved with in the last four years three have been particularly disturbing and charges have been laid. These types of drivers believe that cyclists do not have a right to be on the road because;

1. They do not pay registration and so therefore do not pay for the road infrastructure.
2. They hold drivers up
3. All cyclists break the rules
4. It is too dangerous for cyclists to be on the road
5. They think they have some ownership of the road and that cyclists are encroaching on their territory.
6. Driving culture in Australia is very poor and lacks consideration for all road users.
7. Cyclist behaviour

These attitudes should be addressed through public advertising campaigns and targeted learner driver training, as well as legal measures and better policing.

Education

There have been a number of TV ads informing people to look out for cyclists. These ads are targeting drivers who would normally take care around cyclists. Although these types of drivers are a danger to cyclists they present a less of a problem than the driver who intentionally targets cyclists to intimidate them. This bullying needs to be addressed. It needs to be shown that is dangerous and that it puts peoples lives at risk. These drivers are the ones that need to be targeted in ad campaigns designed to embarrass and humiliate anyone who may think it tough to display this type of behaviour. As a nation we are proud of our tolerance, the Anzac spirit and a fair go. None of these attributes are displayed by these drivers in relation to their treatment of cyclists yet they would think that they have them. The campaign needs to show that this type of behaviour is the complete antithesis of these traits

The answer is not more infrastructure. I believe that this could increase aggressive behaviour because drivers would then believe that cyclists should be using bike paths and segregated bike lanes. There was an incident coming down Cotter rd where a driver applied the brakes in a roundabout after overtaking a bunch. She was trying to cause an accident because she believed that the cyclists should have been on the off road ramps. These are completely impractical for a bunch descending at 50km/hr or more. At the moment most drivers are frustrated that cyclists ride on the road when there is a path next to it. The drivers do not understand that if you are out for a training ride, bike paths are completely inadequate since you need to be respectful of other users including young children, walkers, dogs and families. It would be unsafe to be cycling at speeds more than 30km/hr on these paths. The best option is to keep providing on road cycle lanes so that drivers learn that a bike is just another vehicle that needs to be treated like any car.

Rather than building more infrastructure money should be put into an education campaign. It should use sports people who these aggressive drivers would respect like Mark Webber, rugby league teams (which use on road cycling as part of there fitness regime) and other celebrities that are cyclist enthusiasts and who command respect in the community.

A series of advertisements could be aired addressing the following points

1. Inform road users registration does not cover the cost of road maintenance and infrastructure. Most of the cost of registration is taken up by personal third party insurance. The rest of it covers the cost of compliance. Most of the revenue for road maintenance comes from general tax revenue so if you earn money or buy GST goods and services you are paying for road maintenance and infrastructure. One way is pointing out that pedestrians do not have to

contribute to the maintenance and building of footpaths it is accepted that it is their right to walk safely without being in danger of traffic. In addition cyclists generally have the lower so-called lifestyle type diseases heart disease, diabetes, cancer etc and therefore put a lower demand on the medical system which in turn reduces the cost to the tax payer.

2. Cyclists do not hold drivers up. All major cities in the world realise the only way to reduce traffic congestion is to increase the number of cyclists and reduce the number of cars. This will become more of an issue as the population of our cities and towns increase. One simple demonstration of the impact of cyclists on traffic congestion is to point out the effect of adverse weather during peak hour. The increase in congestion is a direct impact of cyclists driving to work and this can double the commuting times in the morning. Generally cyclist travel at around 25km/hr to 30km/hr. The time cost associated in overtaking a cyclist is about 40s in a 60km zone over one km. It is not a huge time cost and certainly not enough to warrant driver aggression.
3. Some cyclists do break the rules and those that do need to be educated. When a cyclist breaks the rules they are putting their own life at risk whereas when a driver breaks the rules they are putting everyone's life in danger around them. Most drivers speed and most drivers use the mobile phone while driving. You just need to go through a 40km/hr work zone to realise that no one does the speed limit. I have had people complain about the number of cyclists that go through red lights and I always agree and say it is wrong and they should be called to account. But then I ask if they use their mobile phone while driving or speed and the answer is mostly yes and yet they don't see a problem with it. These infringements put peoples lives at risk. Motorised vehicles are responsible for over a 1000 fatalities per year and numerous life changing injuries due to speed and driver error. Yet they don't see speeding or mobile use as bad as a cyclist going through a red light
4. Cyclist are allowed on the roads. The argument that it is too dangerous for cyclists due to the speed differential is just an excuse. People who say this never bring up the tractor on country roads in a 100km/hr zone that can only travel a 40km/hr or the horse float being pulled by a car struggling to do 40km/hr up a hill. All these vehicles present a similar problem. They are going much slower than the speed limit yet there is not the same intolerance or hatred shown towards these road users
5. Although most drivers behave in a reasonable manner, it is the 1% that deliberately targets harasses and bully cyclists that make it very unsafe for all of us. Unfortunately on most rides I do, am passed by hundreds of cars so having one car trying to bully you every time you ride on the road is disturbing. Over the last 10 years I have had things thrown at me, I have been hit by a passengers leaning out the window on a number of occasions, I have been pushed off my bike, I have had numerous drivers, (too many to count), swerve at me or deliberately trying to push me off the road, many drivers refuse to give way on roundabouts or give way signs and lastly on coming drivers lean out the window and abuse me. My bike and I weigh just over 60kg and being female I am quite puzzled by this behaviour because I do not think I actually pose a threat to anyone especially a couple of men in a car or 4WD that can weigh two tonnes. Drivers who display this sort of behaviour are mostly male usually with company. This type of behaviour is cultural and they seem to believe that they have every right to try and discourage me from being on 'their' part of the road. I regard this behaviour as cowardly and I believe that this label needs to be reinforced. These same people would be horrified if their wife, girlfriend or daughter was abused or harassed in this way if they were walking down the street by a group of men yet for some reason once you are on a bike you are fair game.
6. Consider Cyclists. The Australian driving culture lacks consideration compared to most developed countries in the world. I have spent over 900 hours cycling in England, France, Italy and to a lesser degree in Switzerland, Austria and Spain. This equates to two years of cycling. Despite all that time cycling in these countries I have never been subjected to any form of harassment or intimidation. Why are these cultures so different? One thing they realise in Europe is that pedestrians, horses and bikes were the first mode of transport and that they are still legitimate road users. The consideration they show cyclists is also shown to other driver. Simple things like letting people in, using an overtaking lane for overtaking, pulling over if they have a number of cars behind them to allow them to pass is behaviour that I rarely see here.
7. To a certain degree there is also a lack of consideration shown by cyclists and this needs to change as well. Cyclists must be prepared ensure that drivers can get past easily. They must adhere to the road rules so that drivers cannot use this as an excuse for their behaviour.

Cyclists must be aware singling out is good PR if in a smaller bunch and shows drivers that they are willing to try and help them pass. However this does put cyclist at risk from drivers who try and squeeze past coming too close. This code of conduct should be promoted by cycling groups and clubs not by the media otherwise this could be used against cyclists.

Learner Drivers should be educated on the rights of cyclists and at least three questions should be included in the test about these rights. They should be made to ride a bike on road where they have to negotiate traffic. This could be done independently of any road test but proof would be a video clip or pictures showing the learner driver in traffic on a bike.

Law and Policing

Laws should be bought in nationally so it is consistent across all states and territories.

1. There should be a minimum overtaking distance of at least 1.5 metres but 2 metres would be preferable. The Amy Gillett foundation is advocating for one metre but I feel this is not adequate taking into consideration the behaviour of Australian drivers. This should make drivers aware that cyclists do have a right to be passed safely.
2. The driver should be automatically at fault it is then up to the driver in any accident involving a pedestrian or cyclist. It is then up to the driver to prove otherwise as is the law in France and the Netherlands. I think this would help with driver aggression. As with all new laws this will outrage most people but as with the drink driving laws and smoking restrictions they all became an accepted part of society. They are no longer viewed as an outrageous infringement on our freedom. People look upon those who drink and drive with disgust rather than amusement.
3. A speed limit should be introduced for drivers passing a cyclist. This should be at 50km/hr. Having cars passing you at 80 to 100km/hr without giving you adequate space is unsettling.
4. Police need to take complaints seriously against dangerous drivers. At the moment the perception is that police are not particularly sympathetic to road rage involving cyclists. The police must be made to realise that to a cyclist, an aggressive driver is using their car as a weapon and it is a terrifying experience. With all complaints police should ring the owner of the car and let them know that they are on notice so even if the driver is not charged at least he is made aware that this behaviour is unacceptable and illegal. At the moment this does not occur. I was involved in a hit and run near Cotter on the 19th of October. It was deliberate. My friends and I have been targeted by this car on three previous occasions over the last year and on each occasion it was reported but nothing was done about it. A simple phone call to the driver would have ensured he was aware his behaviour was illegal and could be charged. Instead we now have a friend who has lost a lot of skin and has a broken thumb and nearly lost his life because this driver was not counselled after the first complaint.

Cycling is going to become more important in our cities as the population increases to ease road congestion. This is recognised by all town planners. Throughout Europe all types of people ride their bikes on the road; people in suits, dresses, casual wear and lycra. It is accepted as a very important part of the transport system by reducing the amount of cars on the road. The attitude of the average Australian needs to change. You just need to read any comments section of any article about cyclists and the comments are largely negative. This can only be done by education by pointing out the health benefits, the reduction of road congestion and the pressure on parking.

Regards
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