Cycling with myth Australia

My family and friends know me as a keen cyclist and, true to form, one of my first purchases in Brisbane was a bicycle. Those of you who have bought a bike—and the surveys would suggest that this is significantly more than those of you regularly use one—know that the bicycle is only the half of it, with the accessories costing as much again. Certainly in the UK you need the lights and lock and, unless you plan to be a fair weather peddler, you’ll need some waterproofs. These can seem expensive until you compare them with the cost of a minor service for a car.

In Brisbane there are two other important things to buy before you leave the bike shop. The first is the water bottle, which you need if you intend to go more than about 100 metres. The 20 ice cubes topped up with refrigerated water in my bottle each morning melt in less than two kilometres of travel. The second purchase is the cycle helmet.

Many health advocates in the UK are envious of the now nearly country wide Australian laws regarding cycle helmet use, while health advocates in Australia are plainly puzzled by the sort of pro/anti helmet debate taking place in the pages of the BMJ in December 2000.

Some Myths and Truths

Myth number one: All Australian cyclists wear cycle helmets. Truth: It seems to depend who you are and where you are. Although you can be fined for failure to wear, there is still apparently a rite of passage where a scoff-law teenage lad will brandish his helmet free head as a mark of maturity or badge of honour. I’ve only seen one person stopped and cautioned in two years on the roads and bike paths.

Myth number two: You’ve just got to get them wearing the helmet. Truth: You actually have to get them wearing the helmet properly. I don’t understand why, if someone is going to go to the fairly minor discomfort of wearing a helmet, they wouldn’t do it up the strap. Or why they’d wear the strap so loose it could double as a medallion. Or why they’d wear the helmet at a jaunty angle, exposing their forehead—and frontal lobes—to the world. The law here states that the helmet should be properly fixed for good reason; however, this too is poorly policed.

Myth number three: Helmet laws reduce the number of cyclists, as a consequence of the negative publicity about cycle safety during helmet campaigns, and thus reduce the net health of the population. Truth: Tricky; very tricky. I’d have to say, though, that if this is true then Brisbane must have looked more like Beijing prior to the introduction of the law. The problem is with the denominator—the number of people cycling before the law was introduced. Moreover, are the reductions in cycling demonstrated by some studies within a couple of years of the introduction of the law sustained after a settling-in period? Are there secular trends or other events which also influence cycling? As a purely subjective observation, it is an unusual Saturday morning when I see fewer than three or four hundred cyclists while I’m out on a pre-eight o’clock ride beside the river.

Myth number four: Helmets increase risk taking behaviour. Truth: I have no idea, but then I don’t see why helmets should be any different from any other safety measure like anti-lock braking, seat belts, or crumple zones, so I’d have to defer to the experts. Again, very difficult to measure the denominator. The other pertinent question here is “What is risk taking behaviour?” This is less easy to define than it first appears, especially if you would agree that we don’t want children to grow up having never experienced anything with the slightest whiff of risk about it. There are two other excellent reasons to wear a helmet on Brisbane streets. The first is that a sun visor can come in very handy in a city where sunburn is a serious consideration at 7 am. The second is the magpies. These vicious, sharp clawed birds nest in spring and regard anyone coming within 50 metres of their nest as an invader, upon whom to swoop and attack. The combination of startling—causing wobble—and the occasional scratch from a claw can be very challenging to someone with a “live and let live” outlook on life.

Health messages are sometimes simple, like “Don’t smoke, you’ll get sick and maybe die”. Others are much more complex, like “We’d like you to cycle because it is good for you, and good for the environment. However, you place yourself at higher risk of head injury, so we’d like you to wear a helmet too.” The challenge is to get this across clearly and effectively. Maybe we should import some Australian magpies to help tip the balance.

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POSTCARD FROM DOWN UNDER

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