Cycling, physical exercise, and the millennium fund

The bicycle should underpin sustainable physical activity and transport

Cycling provides a rapid, economical, and environmentally sustainable means of transport for short journeys; it also provides great pleasure and is excellent exercise. Yet in developed countries the bicycle has been edged off the roads by the car, and developing countries such as China are following suit—with potentially disastrous environmental consequences. In Britain an imaginative proposal now before the millennium fund, to build a national network of cycle paths, could help to give cycling a boost.¹ Set within a wider strategy on transport and cycling it could help transform our lives for the better.

Sedentary living contributes to ill health and premature death from non-communicable diseases, including coronary heart disease, stroke, non-insulin dependent diabetes, and osteoporosis.² The consultation document from the Health of the Nation physical activity taskforce concludes that activities of moderate intensity, such as brisk walking and cycling, offer the greatest potential of health gain for most of the population.³ Cycling as a means of transport is a way of reintegrating physical activity into the routine of everyday life.

Presently around 2.5% of all journeys in the United Kingdom are made by bicycle, though 62% of all trips are of 5 km or less.⁴ If all journeys of this length currently made by motorised transport were made by bicycle the percentage of all trips made by bicycle would increase to 28%⁴—similar to current levels of cycling in the Netherlands.⁵ The resultant fall in the proportion of trips made by car, from 51% to 30%, would mean less congested and polluted urban environments. In York, which is promoting cycling, 20% of all journeys to work are by bicycle, some five times more than the British average.

Such a revolution in bicycle use nationally needs the commitment of central government and leadership, and there is welcome evidence that this is forthcoming. Firstly, the government has backed the bid to the Millennium Commission to build almost 9650 km of cycle paths connecting and running through Britain's urban centres from Inverness to Penzance.¹ Secondly, planning guidance on transport and land use is aimed at reducing the number of motorised journeys, in particular by private car, and includes specific recommendations on increasing levels of cycling.⁶ Thirdly, in June this year the transport minister (Steven Norris) announced plans for a national cycling strategy, "putting cycling firmly at the hub of national transport policy" which will consider targets for more cycling. Such a strategy is particularly important because one danger of the millennium bid, if successful, is that the requirements of cyclists in cities and towns will be forgotten. The proposed intercity network of cycle paths needs to be linked up to urban cycle networks for maximum benefit. Finally, the new secretary of state for transport, Sir George Young, is a keen cyclist, so cyclists' expectations are high.

For most of the 1980s sales of bicycles outstripped sales of cars. There are an estimated 20 million cycles in the United Kingdom,⁷ but only a small proportion are used regularly. The cycling strategy must therefore tackle the deterrents to

cycling.⁸ These include the danger and unpleasantness of cycling in traffic, lack of secure places for parking bicycles, the generally negative image of cycling as a childhood activity, the perception of bicycles as being largely for leisure or sport rather than transport, and the cultural attitude that giving up cycling and "graduating" to a car is part of growing up.

The cycling strategy also needs to identify funding. With £200m a year (or around 5% of spending on roads in the United Kingdom) over 10 years an additional 30 000 km of city cycle lanes and tracks could be built, 20 000 km of additional traffic calming measures introduced, 2 million cycle racks provided, and a major cycling and health promotion campaign undertaken.⁹

Employers, including the NHS, should also take a lead in promoting the health benefits of cycling by supporting cycling by employees. Measures to do this include providing secure places for parking bicycles and changing facilities with showers, providing bicycles for lease, and ideally paying a mileage allowance (for short journeys) equal to or higher than that paid for car journeys. Public health and health promotion departments, in liaison with local authorities and cycling organisations, should promote the bicycle as a healthy and efficient means of transport. With notable exceptions, most local authorities invest too little in cycling. Yet they hold the key to providing cycle paths; introducing traffic calming measures; permitting public transport to carry bicycles; planning and providing places for parking bicycles; and, where new roads can be justified, designing them also to meet the needs of cyclists. Industry has helped, and can continue to help, by widening the range of bicycles available. The folding bicycle and battery powered assistance are promising developments for broadening the appeal of cycling, especially for commuters.

Changes in planning guidance, the development of a national cycle network, the proposed cycling strategy, and the new guidelines on physical exercise should be turning points for cycling. If so, the cities and towns of the next millennium will be pleasanter and cleaner and their inhabitants healthier.

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