Politics can be deadly

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New Zealand's low driver licence and alcohol purchase ages are a lethal combination

There is little doubt that we could make greater progress in preventing injury if we applied what we already know from research evidence. Politics can significantly hinder this process. In this paper we present the example of alcohol and road safety policy in relation to traffic crash injury among young people in New Zealand.

THE LAST MAJOR PLAGUE OF THE YOUNG

In New Zealand, as in many developed countries, injury causes three quarters of all deaths and is the leading cause of hospitalization in adolescence.¹ Road traffic crashes account for over half of the fatalities² and more than a quarter of inpatient hospitalizations.¹ New Zealand's motor vehicle traffic crash death rate for 15–24 year olds was 22.4 per 100 000 population in 2003, giving it the third highest rate of the 30 countries contributing to the Road Traffic and Accident Database (<http://www.bast.de/htdocs/fachthemen/irtad/>). Early initiation to driving³ and hazardous use of alcohol are major risk factors for road traffic crash injury.⁴ In the late 1990s the New Zealand government considered and rejected increasing the minimum age of driver licensing then lowered the minimum purchase age for alcohol. We discuss the research evidence and politics relating to these issues.

NEW ZEALAND'S DRIVER LICENSING AGE IS TOO LOW

In New Zealand you can obtain a licence to drive a motor vehicle at 15 years of age and drive on a public road without supervision at 15½ years. This contrasts dramatically with most other nations (for example, Australia, member states of the European Union, and China) where the norm is 17 or 18 years of age. There is strong evidence that delaying the age at which a novice driver can drive without supervision reduces the incidence of traffic crashes.^{3 5–7} In the 1980s there were moves to raise the age but these were rejected and a comprehensive graduated driver licensing system was introduced in 1987. That system seeks to reduce

exposure to high risk situations (for example, night-time driving) early in the driving career and has been credited with moderate success in reducing injury crashes.^{8 9} In 1995 a major licensing review was initiated which considered raising the age of driver licensing and extending the period of learner and restricted licences which, effectively, would have raised the age at which drivers could drive unsupervised. These proposals were rejected, ostensibly on the grounds that they would disadvantage teenagers and their parents in rural areas.

Following a recent crash that killed four teenagers the Minister for Transport Safety, Harry Duynhoven, said that he personally was in favour of raising the driver licensing age but it was not government policy to do so. The Prime Minister has argued that there are difficulties in raising the age especially for the rural community. This is undoubtedly the case, but she seemed to ignore the fact that jurisdictions with a licence age of 17 or 18 years (for example, New South Wales, Australia) also have rural communities, and that the injury risk is greater among young drivers in rural areas than in urban areas.¹⁰

NEW ZEALAND'S INSURANCE LAWS AND TEENAGE "SUPERCAR" OWNERSHIP

An added problem in New Zealand is that as a result of changes in import rules and the relaxation of excise duties there has been a flood of cheap second hand Japanese cars on to the market. One can, for little or no deposit, purchase a Subaru WRX for approximately \$US7000. Vehicles such as this have performance characteristics equal to or greater than traditional "supercars", such as Porsches costing 15–20 times as much. Surprisingly there is no published evidence which demonstrates crash risk per unit of travel according to car performance, after adjusting for potential confounders. Despite the lack of evidence a precautionary approach suggests that inexperience, and risk taking in combination with a high performance car, is asking for trouble.

In New Zealand, via our no-fault accident compensation scheme¹¹ we have compulsory third party personal insurance, that is levied at a cost of approximately \$US90 per vehicle. The levy is set *without* reference to the drivers of the vehicle. This arrangement contrasts with the practice of setting premiums for third party property insurance offered in the private insurance market. At present it would be practically impossible for the owner of a Subaru WRX to get third party property insurance if a young person were an intended driver. In contrast to many jurisdictions (for example, the UK and California), third party property insurance is not compulsory in New Zealand. Consequently there are no substantial financial barriers beyond the vehicle salesroom to young people owning high performance motor vehicles. The Transport Safety Minister is personally in favour of compulsory third party property insurance but has confirmed that it is not government policy. There has been no explanation for this stance.

LEFT TO CHANCE: THE LAW ON HAZARDOUS DRINKING

"He did not succeed in changing my mind about conscience votes and I still think of them as an indulgence with the debate surrounding them an appalling ragbag of bigotry and sentimentality"—the late David Lange, New Zealand Prime Minister 1984–89 (p113).¹²

Despite the wealth of overseas evidence suggesting that lowering the purchase age for alcohol would have adverse health effects,^{13–15} in 1999 New Zealand reduced the purchase age from 20 to 18 years. This occurred in the context of a comparatively high rate of adolescent injury morbidity particularly from traffic crashes,¹ to which hazardous alcohol consumption was a leading contributor.⁴

Several reports which have sought to determine the impact of the law change have resulted in agencies and politicians reflecting on the wisdom of that move.^{16–19} Indeed, several Ministers have publicly stated they got it wrong in 1999. One of the more notable in this respect is Damien O'Connor, Associate Minister of Health and the minister with primary responsibility for alcohol policy. When challenged on national television as to why the government was not going to introduce legislation to put the purchase age back to 20 years he responded to the effect that no single strategy will solve the problem. The interviewer responded that she had never heard anyone argue that this was the case and asked why increasing the purchase age could not be considered

one of a mix of strategies. The minister obfuscated.

In May 2005 the *Sale of Liquor (Youth Alcohol Harm Reduction) Amendment Bill* was introduced into the New Zealand parliament. Among other things it seeks to return the purchase age to 20 years. This opportunity to change the current law has arisen by chance via a Private Members' Bill. Private Members' Bills are measures put forward outside of the government program. Which of them go before the House is determined by a random balloting process. The two major parties in parliament, Labour and National, have confirmed that voting on the Bill will be a *conscience* vote for their MPs.

In many liberal democracies, particularly those that follow the parliamentary system of government, the elected members of a legislative body are usually required to vote in single party blocs; that is, they must conform with the official position of their political party as a whole. Often a particular party member known as the *whip* is responsible for ensuring that members vote in accordance with the party line. Members who vote against their party (who "cross the floor") or abstain may face disciplinary measures, including suspension or expulsion from their party. These conventions are irrelevant during a conscience vote, however, as there is no official party line to follow. The introduction into the parliament of this Bill to increase the minimum purchase age raises the question as to why increasing the minimum purchase age is not part of government policy to reduce alcohol related harm, and road traffic crashes in particular.

CONCLUSIONS

Inexperience with the driving task, risk taking, alcohol, and powerful cars make a potentially lethal cocktail. Addressing this important public health issue should not be left to Private Members' Bills and conscience votes. It is time that

the New Zealand government showed leadership in dealing with these matters. It has done it for cancer by banning smoking in all public places.²⁰ It needs to do the same for injury prevention. Raising the age of driving to 17, making third party property insurance compulsory, and making a minimum purchase age of 20 years government policy, would be a good start. This case—and there are probably many similar cases readers could relate for their countries—carries a message for the injury prevention community: (1) encourage governments to consult with researchers in the policy development process and before implementing policy; (2) undertake policy relevant research; (3) ensure wide dissemination of results and be actively engaged in the ensuing public debate; and (4) question government policy stances: what is the evidence base? In the absence of evidence, demand application of the precautionary principle in policy formation, identify conflicts of interest ("follow the money"), and make the public aware of them.

CONTRIBUTORS

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