

HATS OFF TO BORIS AND CO

Promoting helmet use, let alone enforcing it, can stop people cycling. Campaigns & Policy Director **Roger Geffen** explains why CTC champions freedom of choice regarding helmets

CTC HAS adopted a policy of openly supporting celebrities and politicians who chose to cycle without helmets, following new research that shows that telling cyclists and potential cyclists to wear helmets is almost certainly detrimental to public health.

Political leaders such as David Cameron, Boris Johnson and, most recently, Jeremy Hunt have faced criticism for not wearing helmets, as has celebrity Elle Macpherson and cycling minister Norman Baker MP. CTC believes that, far from 'acting irresponsibly', they present positive role models, helping to normalise cycling as a safe, everyday activity.

The research was presented by Australian statistician Prof Piet de Jong at the 2012 international Velo-City cycling conference in Canada. De Jong highlighted the evidence that the health benefits of cycling far outweigh the risks involved. From this, he showed that it only takes a very small percentage reduction in cycle use before helmets would be shortening more lives each year, due to increased physical inactivity, than they could possibly save.

Life years gained and lost

One widely quoted statistic – endorsed by the UK Government – suggests that the life-years gained through cycling in Britain outweigh the life-years lost by around 20:1. On this basis, de Jong's formulae would indicate that helmet laws, or even promotional campaigns, would therefore shorten more lives than they could save if they reduced

You are about as unlikely to be killed in a mile of cycling as a mile of walking

READ THE NEW RESEARCH

Professor Piet de Jong's research is outlined at cyclehelmets.org/1249.html



Helmet promotion may dissuade people from cycling by implying that it is dangerous



CTC supports public figures who choose to cycle without a helmet, such as Boris Johnson

Photo: iStockphoto.com

cycle use by more than about 2%, even if helmets were 100% effective at preventing every potential head injury to all of the remaining cyclists. De Jong's research has been published in the peer-reviewed journal, Risk Analysis.

This finding reflects not only the scale of cycling's health benefits, but also the fact that the risks are much lower than most people imagine.

You are about as unlikely to be killed in a mile of cycling as a mile of walking – do we need walking helmets too?

Lifting the lid on the data

The data on cycling helmets from countries that have enforced helmet laws (such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada) suggests that the only clear effect is to reduce cycling levels – typically by about 30%, with much greater reductions among teenagers – with no evidence of a reduction in injury risk. The risk for the remaining cyclists has increased in some cases. For instance, the introduction of New South Wales's helmet law in 1991 led to a 35% reduction in cyclists' head injuries but it was accompanied by a 36-44% reduction in cycle use.

Why are cycle helmets not more effective? They are designed to withstand minor knocks and falls, not serious traffic collisions. Some

evidence suggests: they increase the risks of neck injuries; that some cyclists ride less cautiously when wearing helmets; and that drivers leave less space when overtaking cyclists with helmets than those without. There is also evidence that cycling gets safer the more cyclists there are – the 'safety in numbers' effect – so reducing cycle use through helmet promotion may undermine safety in other ways too.

Some individuals will nonetheless prefer to use helmets, either for confidence or because of the type of cycling they are doing. CTC fully respects these decisions, likewise the rules imposed by sports cycling governing bodies on the use of helmets for cycle racing.

However, in light of Prof de Jong's research, CTC will seek to convince councils and other bodies to drop any rules they have about avoiding images of helmet-free cyclists in their publications or PR material. We will argue that it is counter-productive to public health to persuade cyclists to wear helmets against their will. CTC will urge authorities to make greater use of helmet-free imagery instead, in order to foster more as well as safer cycling.

For CTC's policy stance and a fully referenced overview of the evidence on helmets, see ctc.org.uk/helmets