

ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Pedestrian Safety

Melbourne — 19 April 2006

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Mr David Healy, General Manager Road Safety, Transport Accident Commission.

The CHAIR — Welcome to David Healy, general manager of road safety at the Transport Accident Commission, the TAC. Thank you, David, for your input into our inquiry. As you are aware, this afternoon we are talking about the pedestrian safety inquiry, which was tabled in Parliament in 1999, and obviously this committee is currently reviewing the outcomes of that inquiry. I will hand across to you for your presentation.

Mr HEALY — Thanks, Ian, and thanks for the opportunity for presenting some information on behalf of the TAC. In so doing I suspect that lots of the material I will cover has been covered previously, so I will attempt to be quite brief.

The specific recommendations that you are focused on currently were not addressed in our response, so I will not be touching on those specifically, but I am happy to give our perspective on any one of those recommendations as you see fit. Rather, I would like to talk in general terms about an overview of our presentation and potentially what initiatives for the future make sense in the context of pedestrian safety. The timing is good, in the sense that we are working towards a new road safety strategy beyond the end of this year, so I imagine any input from the committee would be gratefully received in terms of defining what sort of programs addressing pedestrian safety should be implemented.

From the TAC's viewpoint, because it deals with especially vulnerable road users, it means that usually when they are involved in crashes the outcomes are particularly severe, and quite apart from the incalculable pain and suffering linked to that sort of trauma in the community, it also represents a financial drain on the community via the TAC coffers. Probably well in the order of nearly \$80 million for each new accident year would be linked to pedestrian trauma in terms of TAC compensation over the lifetime of that claim.

In looking at the measures I would like to concentrate firstly on the issue of speed. I say that because it is probably the best mass action treatment we have in relation to pedestrian safety. That feeds into the general approach to road safety that is gaining ground in Australia, and certainly in Europe, dealing with the Safe System: how we develop a Safe System, how the vehicle interacts with the road user and the road and roadside to help ensure that the outcome does not lead to death or serious injury. The design of vehicles is very relevant; the design of the road and roadside, the compliant behaviour of the road user; and the speed of impact will all ultimately lead to an outcome which is less or more severe. We know in the case of pedestrians that once the speed of impact exceeds round about 30 km/h on average the risk of death or serious injury begins to climb.

So in that context, the Safe System approach is really saying that we all make mistakes as human beings. We make mistakes in all walks of life, be it sporting, be it domestic, be it in the workplace or be it on the road. It may be inattention, it may be a misjudgement, it may be a missed perception, it may be a distraction. It is terrible to think that the end result is that, if we do something wrong, the outcome may be death or serious injury. To the extent that people make mistakes, we then start to think about the Safe System and how it might work. How do we make sure that the road user interacts with the vehicle and with the road system to minimise the chance of death and serious injury occurring.

In that respect, in light of the tolerance to serious injury of a pedestrian when impact speeds are 30 kilometre an hour or more, you then start to think that in environments where there is lots of pedestrian activity it seems to make sense to pull down speeds. Clearly, VicRoads have introduced a number of measures of late in respect of that, particularly the introduction of 40 km/h time-based speed zones — and some of them are not time based — such as outside of schools. There are also 40 km/h and 50 km/h zones which apply in provincial towns and in metropolitan ribbon shopping centres.

All of this makes sense because you really are reducing speeds and minimising the chance that, if a pedestrian makes a mistake — or indeed a driver makes a mistake — the outcome would be

likely to lead to death and serious injury. From our perspective, we think the continuation of that process to other high-risk locations makes a lot of sense. I believe the community supports that because they understand that, where there is high pedestrian activity, it is important that speeds are pulled down.

In the last few years there has been a range of speed-related measures, including increased levels of speed enforcement by Victoria Police. The TAC has tried to support the activity of the police and VicRoads and their speed limit changes. It has done this through public education, with the focus on Wipe Off 5. That is really suggesting that small changes in speed, surprisingly, can lead to very large changes in trauma. This is especially so in relation to pedestrians, because they are so vulnerable. We have noticed over that time — and I think it is highlighted on page 4 of our submission — that in fact there have been some very encouraging changes in terms of indicators which relate to travel speeds on our roads. The surveys conducted by TAC suggest that those who report having travelled all or most of the time over the speed limit previously have dropped from 25 per cent down to 15 per cent.

So the changes have been quite significant. While they are not reported here, the travel speeds which have been measured by VicRoads show that, over time, the average travel speeds have been reducing in the 50 kilometre-an-hour and 60 kilometre-an-hour speed zones, which is all to the good in general terms with respect to pedestrian safety.

When we start to look at pedestrian casualty trends — and I am sure MUARC have touched on this subject — we notice that in fact, disproportionately, deaths and serious injury to pedestrians have dropped dramatically over the last few years relative to other road users. This is not surprising when you consider that if you start to reduce speeds by a few kilometres, pedestrians, being the most vulnerable of road users, will be much more susceptible to those few kilometre-an-hour changes than maybe other vehicle occupants who, to some degree, have the vehicle to offer some protection. That is not to say that it will not impact on that group as well. What we have seen is that the road toll has dropped by something in the order of 60 deaths in the most recent period of three years compared with the three years in advance of the introduction of Arrive Alive, the current Victorian government road safety strategy.

Interestingly, when you look at most of the indicators, they suggest that the reductions in pedestrian trauma have been greater. That seems to provide support for the view that speeds have dropped and we are getting a disproportionate benefit, thankfully, in relation to reductions in pedestrian trauma. In terms of our response, Chair, I do not wish to dwell on our responses to each of the recommendations which we felt we had a role in, because I do not think they are the ones listed by the committee as being of particular interest. I would rather turn now generally to what we see as being very useful in terms of countermeasures for the future as they relate to pedestrian safety.

For the reasons outlined earlier, it does make sense to reduce speed at locations where pedestrian and, for that matter, vulnerable road user activity is high — it could be that cyclist activity is high. There is a potential for VicRoads and local governments to expand locations where it makes sense to reduce speeds, where they are appropriately signed so that the road user fully understands the speed limit at that location at that point in time. There is no intent whatsoever to deceive the road user in terms of what speed limits apply. I believe the TAC prospectively has a role in relation to advising the road user as to the rationale underpinning the speed limits — why they are set as they are. In the end it is about trying to promote a compliant, safer community on our traffic system, which is a worthwhile endpoint.

To our way of thinking reducing speeds in provincial towns and local streets, especially ribbon shopping centres, makes sense where pedestrian activity is high, as is the risk of pedestrians being involved in trauma. There are also special treatments which can make sense in particular areas. You might choose to undertake what we call 'gateway treatments' to signal to the driver that he or she is entering an area in which pedestrian activity is high — for instance, it might make sense in

an archway. There might be different textured pavements. All these give an indicator to the driver that they are moving into a different environment — an environment where the likelihood is that pedestrian activity is going to be greater. It makes sense for the driver to slow down; they are more attuned to that reduced speed limit. It is providing an environment which is conducive to a reduction in speeds.

We think that local area traffic treatment, while they can be quite expensive, can make good sense under some circumstances where we change the environments. I know that MUARC have talked about some clever notions with respect to dwell-on-red at certain times of night, which makes great sense in terms of highly intoxicated pedestrians who may unfortunately stumble out on the road and be susceptible to death or injury, given the speeds, particularly early in the morning. We believe that measure, as proposed by MUARC, is a great measure and worth pursuing and evaluating.

In terms of other measures, clearly we still support enforcement and public education support, both with respect to pedestrian safety but also with respect to enforcement, where it makes sense, in a measured way, directed at the speeding drivers, to get the best safety outcome for pedestrians. We believe there is potential in vehicle safety, looking at the other element. So we believe that not only having a compliant road user, a traffic system which is set up to indicate that pedestrian activity is high, a speed limit which matches that and defers to the fact that pedestrians are very likely to be injured at relatively low impact speeds but also that the vehicle is another part of the Safe System we can look at and the role it can play.

There are probably two roles that come to mind for us at the TAC. One relates specifically to our Safe Car project in which we examined intelligent speed systems for vehicles. They need not directly relate to pedestrian safety in itself, but we understand the relationship between speed and pedestrian trauma. Intelligent speed systems essentially use GPS tracking to determine where you are on the road system. You then have an electronic map in a computer in your vehicle with all the speed limits of the roads. The GPS tracker says you are here. It reads that road and says the speed limit is 60, and your speedometer is saying 70. It then provides advice, or it could even be a gentle push back on the accelerator, to provide guidance to road users to stay within speed limits. We think technology has a role to play in the future not only for pedestrian safety but also in terms of traffic safety generally. We believe that is one system that could be of use in making the traffic systems safer for pedestrians. The other would be the actual design features inherent within vehicles themselves, like the profile of the bonnet.

I believe that now the C6 Citroen, which has not reached our shores, has a 4-star rating for pedestrian safety based on a set of standards set by Euro NCAP, which is a new car assessment program in Europe. We are adopting that model in Victoria. That is very encouraging because at one time manufacturers thought it would be impossible to meet that high standard in terms of pedestrian protection.

To Citroen's credit, it has looked at ways it can design the vehicle so that on impact with a pedestrian there is a pop-up bonnet, which means there is more energy-absorbing capacity in the bonnet and the head does not hit the engine sitting right under the bonnet, and it means the outcomes are a lot less injurious for the pedestrian. They are very encouraging developments. Admittedly they are not about to happen tomorrow but to the extent to which more and more manufacturers pick up on this notion of securing a safe vehicle not only for occupants but for other road users, we will glean the benefits through the vehicles in our road system.

It is interesting to note that Sweden is pushing, I believe, within the European Union, to make it such that vehicles sold beyond 2012 will at least have a minimum 3-star pedestrian rating. They have sought to look at the legislative or regulatory option to ensure that manufacturers come to the party and introduce safer profiles and energy-absorbing features in their vehicles. We think that is a promising development too.

In summation, we think there are some great areas of potential for pedestrian safety. They are very vulnerable. We believe the areas relate to speed reduction; they relate to modifying the environment to give the impression that this is a high pedestrian activity with speed limits to match; they relate to enforcement and public education to provide appropriate support for those measures; and they relate ultimately towards safer vehicle design features which can assist in ameliorating the effects of impact on pedestrians. That concludes our presentation.

The CHAIR — Thank you, David. Are there any questions?

Mr BISHOP — Unless you can advise me otherwise, I am quite disappointed at what you have said, because you have only aimed at the driver. We have got pedestrians who might run against a red light, and we have pedestrians out walking in the morning, many more of them, with speaker phones on who cannot hear cars coming. What is the TAC's view in relation to that?

Mr HEALY — I think you are right, and perhaps I was not sufficiently detailed in terms of looking at local area traffic management processes, but there are some very innovative treatments which can assist people in crossing roads. For instance, you can have very wide central strips — not median strips, just white painted strips. They are being used in the Prahran area such that what people tend to do is actually stage their crossing. Older people particularly, rather than actually taking in traffic from both directions, can actually stage their crossing to get to the centre, then they focus on the vehicle from the opposite direction to complete their crossing safely. That all makes sense.

Clearly there are issues too in respect of the timings for traffic signals. If a pedestrian comes up to a signal and pushes the button and has to wait 3 minutes — and it is probably most aggravating when there is very little traffic — it is an encouragement for that person to disobey, so we have to look at the system to give pedestrians greater priority and be mindful of their needs in crossing roads and in using the system. After all, in many ways we want to encourage the community to walk more; it is beneficial to health. The challenge is to provide those encouragements and at the same time make sure the system is safer for them.

In terms of distractions, it is very difficult to discard or eliminate all the distractions we face in our everyday life. That includes motorists in vehicles; they could be technology; they could be of their own device. It could be a child in the back seat; it could be you deciding to change the radio knob. You take your eyes off the rapidly unfolding traffic ahead and you are placing yourself and other road users at considerable risk at the time that distraction happens. Ditto for pedestrians, if indeed they choose to listen to radios.

Before headphones, people were still walking along with radios and very much geared to what was on the radio. Some of these notions of immersing yourself in other activities are not new to the present age. Some of the technologies may well in some eyes make it more acute. But the issues we face in everyday life are that there is a range of distractions that present themselves. We ultimately must make the decisions as to what we choose to filter in and out with regard to our own safety. I would think it would be very difficult to regulate that other than to advise people to be alert on the road system and use crossings and the like where they are provided.

Mr MULDER — Is it the TAC's view that people should disobey the road traffic signals if there is a 3-minute delay, and just walk?

Mr HEALY — No, it is not. What I am saying is that it would be tempting for people under those circumstances. What we want to distinguish between here is human behaviour versus what is legal and illegal so there is no way known that the TAC as an organisation would be condoning that behaviour.

Mr MULDER — I have two quick questions. In relation to the enforcement issue, through about I would say July, August and September 2002 the TAC was very strongly supporting a reduction in speed camera tolerances down to 3 kilometres an hour.

Mr HEALY — Is that a question?

Mr MULDER — Well, that is what I understand was happening at the time. Given that that never actually took place, what is the TAC's position on that now?

Mr HEALY — On speed tolerance?

Mr MULDER — Yes. At the time there was an announcement made that speed camera tolerances would be reduced from 10 per cent down to 3 kilometres an hour.

Mr HEALY — Our view is that the focus of any communication should be on the speed limit. It is a limit. That is what it means. It is not a preferred, recommended, desired speed. It is really under optimum conditions. You can travel up to the limit.

The CHAIR — The maximum.

Mr HEALY — In many conditions you will actually be travelling at below the limit, within the limit. Our general view with respect to that is that we would not want to see a situation whereby it is possible that people would see a de facto speed limit. By that I mean that if I felt I can travel at 64 in a 60 zone, I can travel at 69 in a 60 zone and I know under those circumstances I am under no fear of detection. I think, if any changes happen which could result in that behaviour, my view in purely factual terms would be that if it is possible you have a much less safe environment and if it is possible you will have increased trauma if people are of the view that they can drive up to what they see to be a commonly held de facto limit. That is why our focus has been and will always be on the speed limit meaning exactly that: it is a limit and you travel within it.

Mr MULDER — But the announcement at the time was that it would be dropped to 3 kilometres an hour — full stop.

Mr HEALY — Sorry, we made no such announcement.

Mr MULDER — No, it was announced by the police at the time, supported by the government of the day. It never happened. There is still a de facto or covert tolerance over and above that. I am just wondering what the TAC's position is on that, given it gave such strong support at the time, for it being dropped back to 3 kilometres an hour.

Mr HEALY — We support the actual speed limit. Our main position here is with respect to the police limit. We think our main challenge and communication sense is that people will understand exactly what the speed limit means, why it is set as it is, and why it is important to stay within the limit. We think if there were de facto speed limits, that could potentially lead to an unsafe traffic environment, so we believe that it is best for us as an organisation to focus on the facts, the relationship between speed and trauma, and to talk about what a speed limit means.

In operational terms the police make their decisions with respect to what tolerances should apply, but I do not believe it is in the public interest to have a publicly well-known de facto speed limit. In that case I would think that human behaviour could well mean that there is a drift upwards in speeds, but I cannot be sure of that.

Mr MULDER — Just one other quick question in relation to speeds coming down over the years, dropping back — I think on the graph we looked at what Ian showed — from about 1964 to about 1959, and there was another period where they dropped back. There are issues about enforcement, that it may have caused or contributed to that, but also over that period of time there were roundabouts, traffic lights, islands, lollipop ladies on school crossings, humps, signage — a whole host of initiatives and a lot of black-spot funds have gone into bad intersections. Is there any data that shows which of the two has contributed to the dropping?

Mr HEALY — It is a very difficult question because you are right, over time there are lots of measures that are introduced incrementally and you would hope that they have an incremental benefit in terms of the trauma trend. What happened in relation to speed was that there was a bunch of measures, some of which were picked up by VicRoads in terms of speed limit changes, some of which were picked up by justice employees in respect of enforcement and supported in a general sense through the Wipe Off 5 public education campaign which is probably the biggest large-scale change, it was like macro change. Generally the other measures we believe all have an impact but it is going to be very incremental and, if you like, a very gentle slope downwards over time.

What we saw, if we take deaths as an example, was that they went from an average of about 412 down to what the average is now, 340. So that is an average of three years before and three years after and that is 412, which is a drop of about 70 on that. That is a fair percentage, it is getting up to around 17 or 18 per cent. We believe that is significant. That quite rapid jump is probably bought about by some significant broad-based behaviour change rather than just incremental changes. Incremental changes produce a shallow slope, the changes that we are talking about in respect of speed are much more likely to produce something more significant in terms of the step down and that is what we observed.

Independently of that, Monash University Accident Research Centre is examining the relevant contributions but they have certainly said to us that it is very difficult to disentangle the effects over time of particular measures as they are introduced. I am sorry it is a long answer but it is a difficult one to answer.

Mr MULDER — The Insurance Australia Group is the biggest motor vehicle insurer and its annual report states that vehicle crash numbers and data supporting that have dropped considerably and its profits have gone up as a result. It points to the reason as being quite clearly the change in weather patterns, improved driving conditions. Do the TAC factor that into any of their — —

Mr HEALY — Changed weather patterns?

Mr MULDER — Change in weather patterns, very long dry winters, better driving conditions, and it is in their annual report.

Mr HEALY — I would like to see its analysis in respect of that. I find it interesting, at the very least, and I would like to see what work underpins that final conclusion, if it has done an analysis.

Mr MULDER — We asked for the data, it would not supply it to us, but it may to the TAC.

Mr HEALY — I would be very interested to see data. It surprises me, can I say, very much as a result of — —

Mr MULDER — It is quite clearly in the annual report.

Mr HEALY — I would be very happy to see the results but it would surprise me that the total reduction could be attributable in that way to weather patterns. I would be happy to look at it.

Mr MULDER — Over a period of time, we have had long sustained dry winter periods and this then reflects a drop-off in accidents because of improved driving conditions. In terms of the data and the information together, whether or not it has been — —

Mr HEALY — The answer to that is that we have not looked at that in detail but if indeed there is an analysis elsewhere that suggests that is the case, we would be happy to review it and to do our own analysis.

The CHAIR — Any further questions? Thank you, David, for your time and input into this afternoon's hearing.

Committee adjourned.