LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The risk compensation theory and bicycle helmets

EDITOR—It has come to our attention that a number of readers have been mystified by our contribution to the debate about bicycle helmets published in the June issue (2001;7:86–91). In particular, those familiar with our previous writings on the subject were puzzled by the claim of the Thompsons and Rivara, in what appeared to be the conclusion, that we agreed with them that “bicycle helmets are effective in decreasing head injuries to cyclists”. The confusion was caused by the fact that the responses were published in the wrong order. For those wishing to clear up the mystery, we recommend returning to the published debate and reordering the contributions as follows:

1. Risk compensation theory should be subject to systematic reviews of the scientific evidence (Thompson, Thompson, and Rivara).

2. The risk compensation theory and bicycle helmets (Adams and Hillman).

3. Response from Thompson, Thompson, and Rivara.

4. Response from Adams and Hillman.

It will then be clear that “We did not accept that bicycle helmets are effective in reducing head injuries” and, of crucial importance to the debate, why. We regret that the editor has not seen fit to clear matters up properly by republishing the responses in their logical sequence.

J ADAMS
Geography Department, University College London

M HILLMAN
Policy Studies Institute, 100 Park Village East, London NW1 3SR, UK

Safety in numbers? A new dimension to the bicycle helmet controversy

EDITOR—The recent exchange about risk compensation and bicycle helmets overlooked an important dimension of the issue.1,2 By reducing cycling and, hence, diluting the effect of “safety in numbers”, compulsory helmet laws could have the perverse effect of increasing serious injury rates among those who continue to cycle.

Nearly all fatal cycling crashes involve motorists. But there is evidence that the rate of head injury among those who continue cycling is 0.62 times the rate among those who quit cycling. This thought experiment indicates the need to add another dimension, that of “safety in numbers”, to the ongoing debate over helmet promotion and policy. It also makes clear the need for further research to determine the precise value of the safety in numbers effect. It may very well prove to be the case that more cycling is better for reducing cyclist fatalities than more helmets.

C KOMANOFF
Right Of Way, 636 Broadway, Room 602, New York, NY 10012–2623, USA

1 Thompson DC, Thompson RS, Rivara FP. Risk compensation theory should be subject to systematic reviews of the scientific evidence. Inj Prev 2001;7:86–8.


5 Leden L. Pedestrian risk decrease with pedestrian flow: a case study based on data from signalized intersections in Hamilton, Ontario. Accident Analysis & Prevention (in press).


1st Asian Regional Safe Community Conference

25–27 February 2002, Suwong, South Korea. Further information: Ms Hyun Jong Song, Department of Emergency Medicine, Ajou University School of Medicine, Wonchon-dong 5, Paldal-gu Suwon 442–721, South Korea (tel: +82 31 219 6007, fax: +82 31 219 4568, email: ajemsca@madang. ajou.ac.kr, web site: www.safesuwon.or.kr).

5th International Conference on Fatigue in Transportation. Coping with the 24 hour society

11–15 March 2002, Fremantle, WA, Australia. The conference is on non-prescriptive approaches to managing fatigue in transportation. Further information and abstracts (by 1 February 2002): Laurence Hartley, Conference Convenor, Institute for Research in Safety & Transport, Psychology, Murdoch University, Western Australia 6150 (fax: +61 8 9360 6492, hartley@soc.s Murdoch.edu.au).

4th Fourth International Symposium on Safety in Ice Hockey

5–6 May 2002, Pittsburgh, PA, USA. The objective of the symposium is to review the current state of the art and science of prevention of ice hockey injuries. One session will be devoted to in-line or roller hockey injuries. The meeting will cover new and old protective equipment, coaching techniques to decrease the risk for injuries, playing rules changes to decrease the risk for injuries, and awareness programs for players, parents, coaches, referees, and administrators. Further information: Symposium Co-Chairmen: Alan B Ashare, St Elizabeth’s Medical Center, Boston, MA, USA (tel: +1 617 268 2826, aashare@semc.org) and David J Pearsall,
Thanks to reviewers

Journals cannot function properly without the generous help of reviewers. In the past year we have called on a record number of experts to guide us in making the right decisions. Being listed in this manner is insufficient thanks for the time and effort involved but it is the best we can do. In addition to those listed, every member of the editorial board has reviewed several papers for the journal in the past year. To all of you go my sincere thanks—and, I trust, those of the authors whose papers you reviewed.

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