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 agree that bicycle helmets are effective in reducing head injuries to cyclists” and, of crucial importance to the debate, why. We regret that the editor has nor seen fit to clear matters up properly by republishing the responses in their logical sequence.

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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 cycling fatalities can be decreased (not just injuries) by reducing the rate of cycling fatalities. To cycle, as claimed. Of course, those who quit cycling will no longer reap the manifold and extensively documented health benefits.

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 measure 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 casualties than more helmets.

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.

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.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 rule 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: +1 617 674 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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C Anderson
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R Verrecult
G Vimpani
M Wadsworth
C Ward
D Webster
H Weiss
N Weiss
N Weller
M Widome
D Winn

6th World Conference on Injury Prevention and Control
12–15 May 2002, Montreal, PQ, Canada.

XVI World Congress on Safety and Health at Work

World Congress on Drowning
26–28 June 2002, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. The congress will seek to reduce drowning throughout the world by creating a forum for prevention, treatment and rescue. Further information: Congress Secretariat, World Congress on Drowning 2002, Consumer Safety Institute, PO Box 75 169, 1070 Amsterdam, The Netherlands (fax: +31 20 511 4510, email: secretariat@drowning.nl, website: www.drowning.nl).