



A solicitor's experience

This letter appeared in the June 15 2006 issue of Cycling Weekly. It is written by a solicitor specialising in cycling injury claims.

Compulsive disorder

It's been difficult to resist commenting on the numerous letters in favour of compulsory helmet use, but George O'Brien's letter in the May 4 edition of *CW* broke my resolve. The letter was yet another knee-jerk response, much like those of all of the 'pro-compulsion' letters I have read to date.

Mr O'Brien questions research that indicates no reduction in head injuries due to helmet use, shedding doubt on how the statistics were measured. However, he then goes on to quote his own anecdotal 'evidence' where he has had a few 'marks, scratches and dents', seeking to infer that this experience of one person, who has only been cycling for seven years, is more reliable than any statistical research.

I have been cycling for 26 years and have dealt with over 2,000 cycling accidents on behalf of cyclists, so if anecdotal evidence has any value, I would say mine outscores his! In all this time, both among cycling colleagues and clients, the number I have known who have suffered head injuries have been few – on that anecdotal evidence, the chance of you suffering a head injury of any significance in the first place when falling or being knocked off your bike is fortunately low.

Although they are rare, inevitably I have dealt with several fatal incidents and very severe injury cases. In none of those cases was the death or life-threatening injury caused by a head injury – most were severe internal injuries. The one exception involved someone who was thrown over his bars after hitting a particularly nasty pothole. Unbelievably, the coroner referred to the lack of a helmet and the fatal head injury, ignoring totally the autopsy report, which clearly stated that the cause of death was a fracture of the vertebrae of the upper spinal column.

Turning to hard evidence, whereas there was and is clear evidence as to the number of deaths caused directly by the lack of seatbelts in cars and by drunk drivers, sadly there is very little in relation to the protection or otherwise offered by cycle helmets. Road traffic collision statistics over head injuries make no distinction as to whether the sufferer was wearing a helmet or not, nor between a slight cut or a serious injury where head injuries are reported.

What evidence does exist makes it clear that cycle helmets are only tested to offer protection in some pretty limited, low speed circumstances. Of course your helmet will be scratched and marked if it hits the deck – try dropping it from only a small height with a bag of flour in and you'll find it doesn't take much. And certainly, if your head does hit the deck (which is by no means certain in my experience), it will probably save you from some cuts and bruises. But please don't assume that this slight piece of coated polystyrene saved your life.

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The Bicycle Helmet Research Foundation (BHRF), an incorporated body with an international membership, exists to undertake, encourage and spread the scientific study of the use of bicycle helmets. Also to consider the effect of the promotion and use of helmets on the perception of cycling in terms of risk and the achievement of wider public health and societal goals.

BHRF strives to provide a resource of best-available factual information to assist the understanding of a complex subject, and one where some of the reasoning may conflict with received opinion. In particular BHRF seeks to provide access to a wider range of information than is commonly made available by those that take a strong helmet promotion stance. It is hoped that this will assist informed judgements about the pros and cons of cycle helmets.

For more information, please visit www.cyclehelmets.org.

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