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Motorcycle Helmets are Good Medicine

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Montreal GP Successfully Challenges Canada's Ban on Parallel Private Healthcare Insurance

Eighty-one percent of Americans, as well as every major medical association, traffic safety group and insurance company support mandatory helmet use. Despite this support, in September 2003, the Pennsylvania Legislature repealed the 35-year-old state law mandating helmet use for all motorcyclists. Now only those riders under age 21 are required to wear a helmet. Though another repeal effort failed years earlier, the Pennsylvania Legislature voted for repeal after extensive lobbying by a small but effective group.

Studies show that motorcyclists are 21 times more likely to die in a crash than are car passengers.¹ According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), motorcycles are only 2 percent of the registered vehicles nationally, but motorcyclist deaths are 5 percent of traffic fatalities annually. NHTSA also found that helmets reduce the risk of death by 29 percent and are 67 percent effective in preventing brain injury. While motorcycle enthusiasts disagree with what has been published on the issue, there is compelling evidence that helmet use reduces injury and death. Helmeted riders are less likely to require hospitalization, less likely to die and less likely to suffer head and neck injuries.^{2,3} Maryland repealed its helmet law in 1979; deaths and injuries climbed, leading to reinstatement of the law in 1992. The American Journal of Public Health, reports motorcyclist death rates were cut by almost 57 percent in the 33 months after the law was reinstated.⁴ Helmet use decreases dramatically when states repeal their helmet laws. Subsequently, an increase in fatalities has been observed in every state that repealed its law. After Arkansas repealed its mandatory helmet law in 1997, non-helmeted deaths at the scene of the crash increased from 39 percent to 75 percent.⁵ Florida estimates that the motorcycle occupant death rate increased by nearly 49 percent in the year following the repeal of their helmet law.⁶ The same expected to happen in Pennsylvania.

Advocates of helmet repeal point to loose science to propagate motorcycle helmet myths. They argue that peripheral vision is impaired — yet approved helmets must allow visibility that exceeds normal human peripheral vision. They argue that helmets impair hearing — yet no study has demonstrated that helmets reduce a driver's ability to distinguish between sounds. They argue that helmets increase the risk of head and neck injuries — yet no scientifically valid study has supported this assertion. They argue that the chinstrap may act like a hangman's noose in certain crashes, injuring the rider even more — yet no studies substantiate this claim. Even if true, this would be like arguing that because a seatbelt might keep a driver from exiting a burning vehicle, a mandatory seat-belt law is bad. One study has found no difference between helmet type (full or partial helmet) and fastening status (loose or firmly fastened) and cervical spine injury.⁷

Some bikers may argue, "It's my head, I'll take the risk and I have the right to refuse to wear a helmet." But the state has clearly infringed on all of our "rights" by making it illegal to drive without a license, to operate a vehicle while drunk, to transport a child without a safety seat or to exceed the speed limit. You can be ticketed in Pennsylvania if you exercise your "right" to drive without a seatbelt when you are stopped for another violation.

The government is obligated to provide for safe travel on the highway; this law is no different. Repeal of Pennsylvania's helmet law will probably cost millions in medical care, long-term rehabilitation, nursing-home care, lost productivity, and the loss of a productive taxpaying citizen. Data analyzed from the National Trauma Data Bank has shown that non-helmeted riders who are injured accrue greater hospital charges and are significantly less likely to have health insurance.⁸ The NHTSA estimates that mandatory helmet use saved \$13.2 billion between 1984 and 1999, and an additional \$11.1 billion could have been saved if all motorcyclists wore helmets. Already overburdened emergency departments, hospitals, and taxpayers will absorb the cost for uninsured motorcyclists. If the cyclist has insurance, each policyholder will assume some of the cost of allowing bikers to exercise their "right" to ride without a helmet.

In my opinion, while this may look like a public policy issue with clear and common sense answers, it is actually a civics lesson in the legislative process. It's about advocacy. Why was helmet law repealed? It was not repealed because to do so was a good idea. It was repealed because the motorcycle lobby advocated to their legislators better than physicians did. While a small group of advocates were successful at bringing around the repeal of the helmet law, these same tactics can work to reinstate the law. Let your voice be heard.

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