



Use your head, wear helmets

| 13th October 2012, 02:03 pm

I write as a UK doctor currently visiting Goa to commend your coverage of the difficult issue of motor cycle safety and helmet use in your October 6 issue.

In travelling around Goa, I have been concerned to note how few riders and even fewer passengers use motorcycle helmets, let alone other protective clothing, which further diminishes the rate and severity of injuries in accidents.

The raw data on motor cycle deaths does not do justice to the full extent of damage and injury from motor cycle accidents. The unprotected human head is particularly susceptible to lifelong brain damage and incapacity for those who survive the initial impact, wherein a seemingly minor knock becomes a wrecked life.

In the UK, on the basis of overwhelmingly persuasive clinical and epidemiological evidence, it became a legal requirement to wear a government approved safety helmet whilst riding a motorcycle (The Motor Cycle Crash Helmet Act), on June 1, 1973. The wearing of helmets and other forms of protection is now both compulsory and virtually universal, and the incidence of neuro trauma from motor cycle accidents has plummeted.

There are many individual freedoms which are well worth defending, but the freedom of self and family destruction through failure to use the simple and effective protection of motor cycle helmets for all riders and passengers is not one of them.

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Background

No-one who has visited India can fail to have been struck by the general traffic chaos on Indian Roads, and by the admixture of trucks, cars, buses, cycles, animals and motorcycles with up to six persons astride a machine intended for one rider and one passenger.

I have been privileged to visit the country in a professional capacity on a number of occasions. In 2012 I was at a surgical conference in Goa, which is reputedly one of the most socially advanced of Indian states.

On 28th September 2012, The Times of India had reported on a national debate to make the wearing of motor cycle helmets compulsory on all roads, with a report on the Goan legislature's intent to implement the national directive in a phased manner, such that:

"From PANAJI, Goa: The state has decided not to go ahead with making wearing of helmets compulsory for pillion riders in the first phase of implementation.

"We are of the view that both - the rider and pillion- should use helmets but we'll do it in a phased manner. In the first phase beginning next month, we will make wearing of helmets for riders compulsory across the state on all roads," transport minister Ramkrishna 'Sudin' Dhavalikar told TOI on Thursday.

"We have consulted various sections of society - including MLAs, zilla panchayat members, motorcycle pilots association and others and we have received feedback," he said adding that all have shown concerned about road fatalities.

He said that the government is of the firm view that wearing helmet has to be made compulsory for both, the rider and pillion rider. Currently, the helmet rule for riders is being implemented only on highways for the last eight years. Soon, it will be mandatory for all two-wheeler riders to use helmet on all roads in the state including city and village roads.

As for the exact date of implementation, Dhavalikar said that it will probably begin from October 2. "But the final decision will be taken after a meeting with chief minister [Manohar Parrikar](#)," he added.

A few months after implementing the rule for riders, the government will take up the implementation of the rule for pillion riders."

The weekly English language Goan newspaper had picked up on the story in its issue of 6th October 2012.

On reading this article in a copy of the Goan in our hotel, I was reminded of the dramatic impact that the same law had had on road safety in Cambridgeshire in the mid 1970s, and the transformative impact both on the emergency work of UK neurosurgeons and the decline in organ donorship.

I therefore wrote to the newspaper in spirited support of the state legislative's clear support for the programme in Goa, and I was pleasantly surprised to see it printed the following week before leaving Goa.

I defer to current residents of Goa in the late 2020s for feedback as to whether and how the law was enforced, and as to what difference it may have or have not made to neurosurgical trauma rates in the state.