

# PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACHES TO IMPROVED ROAD SAFETY

Local Public Health Units (PHUs) can have a role in applying the strategies of the "new public health" to help improve road safety in their areas.

In NSW motor vehicle fatalities are the single most common cause of death in males and females until the middle decades of life<sup>1</sup>, while serious injury reduction has rightly been identified as a health priority at both national<sup>2</sup> and State<sup>3</sup> levels.

Attempts at road injury reduction have tended to follow traditional approaches including engineering solutions (better roads, safer cars) and enforcement (speed limits, compulsory seat belt wearing and random breath testing).

These approaches have undoubtedly been successful. Total road deaths in NSW have fallen from a peak of 1,400 in the late 1970s to fewer than 800 on the most recent figures, at a time when the number of registered vehicles and total kilometres travelled have been steadily rising<sup>4</sup>. However, it has been suggested that the potential for improvement using traditional approaches is now decreasing, and that new strategies will be required if the gains are to be maintained<sup>5</sup>.

The approaches proposed in the Ottawa Charter on Health Promotion<sup>6</sup> are well accepted in public health circles, and principles such as 'healthy public policy', 'intersectoral collaboration' and 'community participation' have become popular terms among exponents.

## ROAD SAFETY 2000 AND BEYOND

In an interesting example of concept transference across sectors, the Road Safety Bureau of the NSW Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA) has obviously been influenced by such approaches. In its recently published Road Safety 2000 — the Strategic Plan for Road Safety in NSW 1990s and Beyond<sup>7</sup>, it proposes four key strategies:

- involving the whole community in road safety (i.e. community participation);
- making road safety a major priority in all transport and land use decisions (i.e. 'safe' public policy);
- continuing to educate all road users, to improve roads and traffic systems, and vehicle safety systems, emergency response times and the treatment of casualties (i.e. maintenance of successful traditional approaches); and
- coordinating the efforts of organisations working in public health, transport and related fields (i.e. 'intersectoral working').

To give a local focus to these initiatives the RTA has sponsored a number of community-based road safety support groups around NSW. The Illawarra Road Safety Group (IRSG) is one of these. It was established two years ago and comprises representatives of the RTA, Police Department, Department of School Education, Catholic Education Office, NRMA, University of Wollongong, Consumers Transport Council, Healthy Cities Illawarra and the Illawarra Public Health Unit.

The benefits of such intersectoral working have been demonstrated in a recent successful campaign involving the media and local schools, focusing on high non-seat belt wearing rates among primary school children. Following this essentially 'top down' approach there was an improvement in rear seat belt wearing among the target group from less than 35 per cent to more than 90 per cent<sup>8</sup>.

However, in order to involve the whole community in road safety issues, and to determine their perceived priorities, a more 'bottom up' approach was necessary and the group organised a one-day hotline: Road Safety — Have Your Say.

ABC, commercial radio and the printed media carried stories, news items and a limited amount of paid advertising supporting the initiative. Five incoming telephone lines were staffed by members of the participating organisations and more than 280 calls were taken, covering 400 individual road safety issues. The offer of one year's free vehicle registration from the RTA for the best road safety idea may have acted as an incentive to this high participation rate.

More than two-thirds of the calls related to specific local hazards and black spots, while the remainder concentrated on more general ideas for improving road safety.

The IRSG decided to award two prizes — one for the best general idea (portable 'rumble strips' to give motorists physical warning of temporary hazards such as road crashes, or road works) and one for a specific local problem (a solution to a particularly hazardous merge on a fog-prone section of road near the end of the Southern Freeway).

From the phone-in, several concerns such as the proper use of roundabouts, and pedestrian safety, were identified as future areas for collaborative action by the IRSG.

## CONCLUSIONS

For many health issues, responsibility is shared between a number of other organisations and instrumentalities, while identification, participation and support by the local community is essential if longer-term results are sought.

Community consultation and needs analysis are recognised in the health promotion literature as an essential component of enlisting this support<sup>9</sup>.

Taking a joint role in the recent road safety phone-in is believed to have had a range of advantages for the Illawarra Public Health Unit:

- it has raised the profile of the Unit and promoted links with the media;
- it has strengthened working relationships with other government and non-government organisations; and
- the community response has identified a number of areas where future collaborative work is likely to bring results in terms of improved road safety.

Such an approach is commended to other Public Health Units as a way of putting into practice the concepts of the Ottawa Charter and of ensuring the broad-based support essential to improved road safety<sup>10</sup>.

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