

*Letter published in The Herald 22.10.13*

*Below is my original text – it was edited/shortened somewhat in the printed version.*

## **TIME TO TACKLE REAL CYCLING SAFETY ISSUES**

Dear Editor

As someone who cycled to work (in combination with rail) for much of my working life I have to agree with the research that using a bike for your everyday journeys helps you feel good [Herald 21 October].

Unfortunately many people are deterred because they feel unsafe. Much of the blame for this can be placed on messages from government, media and the manufacturers of 'safety' equipment, which make cycling look and feel really dangerous.

The truth is far more mixed than those simplistic messages. If you use your bike only for trips on local minor urban roads, for example to the shops, to work, or to visit friends, your risk of death per km is less than one-twentieth that of someone cycling on a rural 'A' road. Indeed, remarkably, you are safer than the average Danish or Dutch all-areas cyclist!

In general, and of course there are exceptions, 'A' roads are far more dangerous places to be than lesser roads in terms of deaths or serious injuries per km. Rural roads (both major and minor) are more dangerous than the equivalent urban roads for deaths, though fairly similar for injuries. The figures can be found by googling RAS30018.

If the government is genuinely wanting more people to travel by bike, whilst at the same time reducing casualties, they should stop pretending that all cycling is dangerous and they should start to deal with the situations where danger is real.

Main roads in cities provide direct routes from A to B, generally at good gradients, and therefore many people will cycle on them. But, as the figures show, they are the main urban danger areas. They need high quality cycling infrastructure, physically segregated where possible.

Rural roads are more costly to tackle because of longer distances and lower density of cycle use. However, solutions such as Strict Liability, average speed cameras and the tackling of blackspots would reduce casualties to all categories of road user.

Meanwhile, safety campaigns which concentrate solely on the cyclist protecting themselves are very likely doing more harm than good. The emphasis on danger and on the need to dress up means that many people don't dare use a bike at all - not even to pop out to the local shops. Others will take the intended message and, unfortunately, will feel that they are sufficiently safe on any road if dressed up suitably. It is appalling and frightening that motorists and cyclists are not warned in 'safety' messages from government and other agencies that cycle helmets are designed for a crash at closing speeds of only up to around 12mph.

*[this para was cut in the published version, purely for space reasons I think]*

The huge decline in cycling casualty rates we have seen over several decades has halted in the last few years, and they are starting to rise again. Yet this is happening at exactly the same time that the 'cyclist protect yourself' message is getting through. Indeed, many of the high profile cycling deaths we have seen recently have been to experienced and fully equipped cyclists - but on roads with faster and more dangerous traffic.

It is high time that government and the 'road safety industry' accepted what is happening in the real world and addressed the real issues - both in terms of infrastructure and in the messages they are giving to the public.

Yours Sincerely

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\*\* Great sites: [badscience.net](http://badscience.net), [38degrees.org.uk](http://38degrees.org.uk), [copenhagenize.com](http://copenhagenize.com), [thebikestation.org.uk](http://thebikestation.org.uk), [ghgonline.org](http://ghgonline.org)