

Development of a new drink- and drug-driving package for Victoria

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Abstract

Alcohol interlocks were first introduced in Victoria in 2003, and drink-driving laws have been progressively strengthened since. Victoria also has long-standing mandatory alcohol and drug education and assessment requirements. In December 2017 legislation was passed that further extends these countermeasures. All Victorian drink-drivers at any illegal BAC reading will now have their driver licences cancelled, while first-time drug drivers face longer suspension periods. All impaired drivers must complete a new behaviour change program, and all drink-drivers will be required to use an alcohol interlock. This strong package of measures will assist in further reducing impaired driving in Victoria.

Background

Alcohol interlocks have been a mainstay of Victoria's drink-driving strategy. Introduced in 2003, Victoria's alcohol interlock program was expanded in 2006 and 2014. At this point alcohol interlocks became mandatory for most drink-drivers. To address the ongoing contribution of alcohol to road trauma, the Victorian Government determined it would complete the rollout of the alcohol interlock program to all drink-drivers.

It was also recognised that the nearly twenty-year-old drink-driving education and assessment program mandated for some Victorian drink- and drug-drivers required revision to reflect contemporary practice.

Both initiatives are contained in Victoria's road safety strategy and action plan *Towards Zero 2016 // 2020*.

Policy Development

For three years to March 2018 VicRoads worked with subject matter experts spanning road safety, clinical and forensic psychology, alcohol and drug treatment and drink and drug-driving program delivery to develop the new package of measures.

VicRoads had recently conducted a comprehensive outcome evaluation of Victorian drink-driving countermeasures that underpinned policy decisions about the expansion of the alcohol interlock program and the role of licence bans in preventing further crashes and offending. It was clear from the evaluation that a licence ban was an essential component of the reforms. The rising contribution of drug-driving to road trauma also indicated an increase in the licence ban for drug-driving was warranted.

A literature review, expert consultations and review of current programs including discussions with drink and drug-driving program providers informed the development of best practice principles that were used to develop a new behavior change program. The program design caters for both drink and drug-drivers.

Outcomes

From 30 April 2018, full driver licence holders with a first offence BAC between 0.05 and 0.069 and commercial drivers with a BAC above zero but below 0.05 receive a 3 month licence ban instead of 10 demerit points. When licensed, these drivers must use an alcohol interlock for a minimum of 6 months. The interlock condition will not be removed unless performance requirements are met. This means all convicted Victorian drink-drivers now receive a driver licence ban and interlock condition.

First offence drug-drivers receive a 6 month licence suspension, increased from 3 months, while repeat offenders face a minimum 12 month licence ban, up from 6 months.

All drink and drug-drivers must also complete the new VicRoads-managed behavior change program. The program comprises a 6-hour drink-driver program for first offenders with a BAC below 0.15, a 6-hour drug-driver program for first offenders and a 10-12 hour intensive program for high risk drink and drug-drivers. The program includes motivational interviewing techniques and cognitive behavioural strategies along with screening and assessment for alcohol and other drug issues and referral for further assessment as appropriate.

A comprehensive communications campaign accompanied the changes.

Implementing these reforms has entailed overcoming concerns about penalties, program design issues and implementation challenges.

Conclusion

In April this year Victoria implemented a significant new package of evidence based measures to address drink- and drug-driving. Increasing driver licence bans, mandating behavior change programs and extending alcohol interlock conditions sends a clear signal to the Victorian community that impaired driving will not be accepted. The package of measures will assist in driving down alcohol and drug related road trauma, as well as reinforcing the key message to the community that substance use and driving should be completely separated.