

## Time to Re-Think Our Approach to Road Safety Education?

Teresa Senserrick<sup>a</sup>, Oscar Oviedo-Trespalacios<sup>a</sup>, Catherine McDonald<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Centre for Accident Research and Road Safety – Queensland (CARRS-Q), Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Australia

<sup>b</sup> University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing, United States

### Abstract

In other health-related fields, education regarding risky behaviours has progressed from abstinence-only (“don’t do it”) messaging to harm reduction approaches. The latter does not preclude the “abstinence is safest” message, but acknowledges that risks can be inevitable and, therefore, also includes education on ways to reduce potential harms should the risky behaviour occur. Wide adoption of this approach regarding alcohol and other drug use, for example, is associated with improved safety behaviour and reduced harm. We argue road safety education is generally limited to abstinence-only approaches and question whether it is time also to take a harm reduction approach.

### Background

Road safety education messaging, such as in public campaigns and new driver/rider licensing courses, tends to focus on prevention of risky behaviours. This includes “don’t do it” cautions and ways to achieve this; e.g. how not to combine driving and substance use, change sleep/driving times to avoid fatigued driving, use of speed and seatbelt reminders, and phone blocking apps. The ‘Fatal Five’ behaviours account for substantial trauma on our roads and therefore prevention messaging is highly justifiable. However, taking into account human error, we have limitations in attention and alertness, are ‘wired’ to be social, including staying connected to families and friends, and are subject to peer and time pressures, as examples. Therefore, the chance we can avoid all risks at all times on all trips can be unrealistic in our multifaceted, often busy and highly connected lives.

### Harm reduction

Historically, ‘harm reduction’ (also ‘risk reduction’ or ‘risk/harm minimisation’) is associated with education regarding alcohol/other drugs. Messaging ranges from ensuring a sober trusted ally is at-hand should an adverse reaction occur, for example, to more active interventions such as needle exchange programs, safe injecting rooms and pill testing. The approach is also evident in the move away from abstinence-only sex education in schools to inclusion of safe sex messaging and initiatives to improve access to condoms, for example, in efforts to reduce sexually transmissible diseases and teenage pregnancies. Research provides evidence of considerable success in establishing safer behaviours and reducing harm outcomes (e.g. Charlet & Heinz, 2017; Resiak, Mpofu & Athanasou, 2016; Stranger-Hall & Hall, 2011).

### Harm reduction approaches in road safety

Limited road safety education examples adopting a harm reduction approach are evident in forward planning circumstances (e.g. designated driver campaigns). However, many risks arise during a trip. For example, despite contrary intentions, motorists can find themselves speeding when failing to be vigilant due to cues from surrounding traffic and road designs. Fatigue on-set or distractions (e.g. a phone alert after forgetting to mute) can also occur unexpectedly. Education for new motorists commonly promotes strategies to maintain a crash avoidance space around the vehicle. A harm reduction approach would push this further to educate motorists that, should they find themselves in circumstances that compromise their vigilance, then allow an even greater safety space, especially forward headways – improve the chance you will have time and space to react should you be late in detecting a hazard. This is not to promote risk-taking, which is still portrayed as dangerous and to be

avoided. However, it also acknowledges that total compliance is challenging, therefore, if such risks eventuate, then adopt a safer action to minimise potential harm.

## Conclusion

Abstinence-only education has limitations in preventing risk behaviours and harmful outcomes. While some road safety risks should never be compromised (e.g. drink driving), realistically, some risks are inevitable on-road. This presentation will promote discussion on potential benefits of enhancing road safety education to acknowledge this and adopt a harm reduction approach. A variety of road user and risk scenario examples will be explored.

## References

- Charlet, K., Heinz, A. (2017). Harm reduction: a systematic review on effects of alcohol reduction on physical and mental symptoms. *Addiction Biology*, 22(5), 1119-1159 (doi:10.1111/adb.12414).
- Resiak, D., Mpofu, E., Athanasou, J. (2016). Drug treatment policy in the criminal justice system: a scoping literature review. *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 41. 3-13 (doi:10.1007/s12103-015-9329-z).
- Stanger-Hall, K. F., Hall, D. W. (2011). Abstinence-only education and teen pregnancy rates: why we need comprehensive sex education in the U.S. *PLoS One*, 6(10), e24658. (doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0024658).