Mobility Scooter Safety

Presented by Scooters Australia to the ACCC Reference Group meeting on Scooter Safety, September 17th, 2009 in Canberra

A. The Context

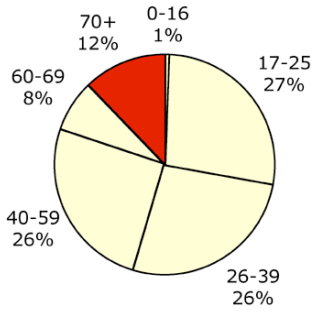
The Users

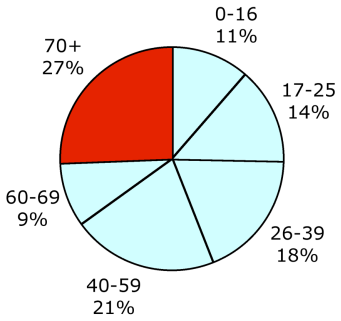
The overwhelming proportion of mobility scooter users are in the 70+ age group. In fact in recent years, most purchasers are aged over 80.

This group is over-represented in almost all categories of road deaths and accidents in Australia in the period 2000-2008, and is most likely similarly represented in years prior to this. As a percentage of the population, all road deaths apart from those using motor bikes and bicycles have a higher representation of people over 70 years of age than is their proportion in the Australian population.

The 70+ group in the 2006 census made up 9.5% of the population. Total road deaths for this group made up 12.5% of the total, and 25% of all pedestrian deaths in the period 2000-2008 (see table).

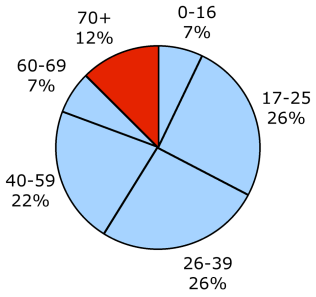
Driver Deaths

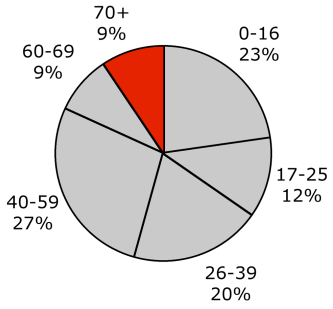




Pedestrian Deaths

All Road Deaths





Population

These figures are to be expected as this age group is more frail, with less physical ability and a lower accident recovery rate than the average. Older people are less able to cope with physical trauma and are more susceptible to accidents than the average.

This age group are also more cautious and conservative in their choice of transport options, being easily discouraged from trying new products. They are also more likely to be persuaded by adverse reports of safety issues.

The Products

Design

Mobility scooters are inherently safe as a mode of transport:

- The user is seated low to the ground (about the same height as an office chair),
- The vehicles move slowly (a little above walking pace at maximum speed),
- They are designed to travel only on footpaths (apart from crossing the road).

The controls are specifically designed to be fail-safe and do not need legs / feet to operate. Any fault with the mechanics or electronics will shut the scooter down. Finger or thumb pressure is required to activate movement in the scooter. Whenever this pressure is released the scooter comes to an immediate halt (within its own length). The brakes come on as soon as finger pressure is released.

Those scooters that have been approved for use in Europe must meet stringent European safety and quality standards. Most, but not all, of those sold in Australia meet these standards.

Sales Volumes

Few scooters are now manufactured in Australia. The major manufacturers are located in Taiwan, Israel and China. A small number of scooters from the USA and Europe are imported into Australia. While no figures are kept on the actual size of the market for mobility scooters, figures from Customs import data (code: 871390), which include electric wheelchairs, indicate that around 12,000 mobility scooters were imported in 2008 (plus or minus 10%). This is about 1.2% of the size of total motor vehicle sales for the year 2008 (1,0125,165 – "Road Vehicle Sales", MTAA, New Motor Sales 2009).

Greenhouse Gas

Because scooters are battery powered, their contribution to greenhouse gas emissions is far less than motor vehicles (see: www.scootersaus.com.au/moreinfo.html).

This table illustrates the GHG savings, per 100 km traveled:

Motor Car CO2	Mobility Scooter using "Coal Power"	Saving on Car use	Mobility Scooter using "Green Power	Saving on Car use
18.2 kg	0.45 kg	17.75 kg	0.06 kg	18.14 kg

Infrastructure

In the 20+ years that scooters have been on the market, infrastructure has not been adequately improved to cater for the growth in this transport mode. In many cases it is poorly maintained and dangerous. Often, users are forced to travel on the road because there are no footpaths.

B. Safety

Safety Standards

Standards Australia do not have a standard for mobility scooters. There is a standard for electric wheelchairs that is sometimes claimed to apply to scooters. TGA regards mobility scooters as a Medical Device but the TGA requirements are not enforced. Non TGA compliant scooters are often imported into the country despite the threat of penalties.

Safety Performance

The claim by the ACCC that there have been 71 deaths in the period 2000 – 2009 needs to be justified by the Minister. From anecdotal evidence within the industry, gathered over the last month by Scooters Australia, the figure seems to be exaggerated. The Monash University figure quoted in "Hazard" Ed 62, 2006, seems closer to the truth, even though the authors readily admit that accurate data is not easy to find and is ambiguous as to the actual accident events.

According to the Monash figures (2006), there may have been 6 deaths "associated" with mobility scooters over a 5 year period in Victoria (2001-2005). Extrapolated, this would equate to around 25 deaths nationally over that period, or 5 per year. While even this figure seems a little high, it certainly seems closer to the truth.

Nevertheless, by accepting the higher ACCC figures, deaths associated with mobility scooter use over the period 2000-2008 would be approximately 67. Comparing total road deaths for the period, per vehicle sale in 2008, with total scooter deaths for the period, per scooter sale in 2008, the figures are 15.32 and 5.57 respectively (see attached table). That is, scooter use is more than 2.75 times safer than using the roads, and significantly safer than being a pedestrian, for the 70+ age group.

So, to put this into perspective: those in the 70+ age group are far more vulnerable as drivers, passengers or pedestrians, than they are as mobility scooter users.

Benefits to the Community:

Increased use of mobility scooters, especially when they are a substitute for the motor car, has the following benefits for the community:

- Reduction in health care costs due to a lowering of the road accident and death rates
- Reduction in road deaths and injury to the 70+ age group
- Maintaining people in their own homes and the consequent cost savings
- Reduction in greenhouse gas emissions
- Increase in well being for the 70+ age group with consequent reduced health costs

C. Consumer Benefits

Most scooter users choose scooters as their preferred form of transport for one or more of the following reasons:

- They have relinquished (either voluntarily or by necessity) their car license.
- They live more than 200 metres from public transport routes.
- They live too close to the shops for taxis to deem it a worthwhile fare.
- They have some kind of disability that prevents long distance walking, especially when carrying a load.
- They do not want to be stuck at home, dependent, or institutionalised.
- They can't afford to continue to pay for a car when they only use it for short trips.
- They wish to do something about their carbon footprint.

As such, mobility scooters have become an indispensable form of transport for a large number of people who wish to keep their independence and maintain their well being. They have become, in effect, a safer and cheaper alternative to the motor car.

Summary:

Because they are a much safer form of transport for this demographic, every effort should be made to encourage people in this age group to move from motor vehicle transport to mobility scooters. Any effort to increase the safety of the product should not discourage increased use and should make it easier for people to switch to this form of transport.

"I've given up my car and live more than 2 kms from the shops. Without my scooter I simply would not be able to get there without relying on others". John, Sydney.

D. Promoting Safety for Scooter Users

In the light of the above issues, Scooters Australia believes that the primary safety issue in the community must be to encourage the 80+ age group to consider swapping their motor vehicle for a mobility scooter as a way of reducing the death and accident rate on the roads. Only within this context should mobility scooter user safety be addressed.

Efforts to increase safety for mobility scooter users should:

- Refrain from misleading or alarmist publicity which unreasonably increases the sense of vulnerability of older Australians (eg “Epidemic ahead”, “Alarming death rate”, etc)
- Promote the safety and benefits of scooter use
- Encourage motor vehicle users in this age group to consider switching to alternative transport, including scooters
- Promote improvements to industry standards, user training and community awareness

In our experience, most scooter accidents occur where there is:

- Poor infrastructure for scooter use, especially ramps from footpath to road, and poor or non existent footpaths – by far the biggest cause of accidents
- Inadequate or non existent training, especially by internet retailers
- Inappropriate choice of model by users
- Poor levels of awareness of motor vehicle drivers, especially at private driveways

E. Recommendations

Scooters Australia proposes the following initiatives to address the safety concerns of both mobility scooter use and motor vehicle use in this age group:

1. Increased government spending on infrastructure:
    - Footpaths and cycleways
    - The footpath / road interface
2. Discourage internet sales of mobility scooters. Medical devices of any sort should not be sold over the internet and training cannot be given via mail / internet order.
3. Enforcement of TGA requirements and establishment of a Mobility Scooter standard
4. Active encouragement by government agencies for motor vehicle users to consider scooters as an alternative to the car
5. Government education campaign to the general public about the presence and use of mobility scooters in the community. eg the Motor Cycle Beware Campaign in Victoria.

> *“It would be very easy for the Australian Government to stop the importation of these non TGA compliance scooters by making it [a] requirement that the TGA registration numbers are listed on import and customs clearance* documentation”. Ian Rothall, Scooter World, Adelaide.

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