

Zero road deaths a goal we should aim for

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Eliminating road deaths is not only possible, but worth aiming for. Photo: Joseph Feil

It has been an appalling holiday season on Australia's roads. Seven people died in just 48 hours in South Australia. By New Year's Eve more than 20 people died in a little more than a week. Every New Year we lament the number of deaths on our roads. Sometimes it's good news - the numbers are down on the previous year. However, too often the yearly, and holiday, road deaths rise.

Regardless of the numbers, our road fatalities and serious injuries are too high. They could be far lower, even zero. For many Australians, a goal of zero fatalities on our roads may seem unattainable, yet in countries like Sweden and the Netherlands, such a vision is part of the government's agenda. In Australia we need to stop thinking about "lowering the road toll" and instead change our focus to "eradicating deaths and serious injuries across our road transport system". Here's how.

Last month my colleague, Tony Bliss, presented a lecture at Britain's Houses of Parliament titled *Road safety in the 21st century - public expectations of government*, attended by almost 100 parliamentarians, government officials, transport safety experts, business people, road user groups and others.

His remit, and certainly ours at the Monash University Accident Research Centre (MUARC), is that we must shift the emphasis away from encouraging drivers to take responsibility for the death and injury on our roads - to ensuring that governments make roads and vehicles safer. After all, the government implements the planning, design, operation and use of the road network; the entry and exit of vehicles, drivers and operators to and from the network; and the recovery of crash victims from the network and their emergency care and longer-term rehabilitation.

Governments are also responsible for making information they need to make driving ve the paucity of information about safe drivinsafer. not driving drunk, not using your mobilere is a been an enormous increase in intelligeg, drivers and the transport system more riving too fast, not driving drunk, not using your mobile phone and so on. Yet, in the last decade there has been an enormous increase in intelligent transport systems which will enhance the safety of drivers and the transport system more broadly. However, as Mr Bliss told the British Parliament, the convergence of technologies, policies and tools is running ahead of government processes aimed at ensuring safe mobility outcomes. "Unless governments quickly get in step and proactively engage in these developments, we could see a regulatory tsunami addressing unintended road safety consequences arising from the introduction of new technologies," he told the British parliamentarians.

At MUARC we are preparing a study aimed at assessing the benefits of vehicle-to-vehicle and vehicle-to-infrastructure communication. This technology allows cars to "talk" to each other as well as to the road infrastructure so that cars can detect and avoid an upcoming hazard before the driver is even aware it exists. Yet as safe as this system sounds, we really don't know how these systems will impact on the driver. Will it make them feel they have to concentrate less, and more prone to do other things than driving when behind the wheel? We simply don't know.

In 1997 the Swedish parliament wrote into law a "Vision Zero" plan, promising to eliminate road fatalities and injuries altogether. Although the number of cars in circulation in the country and the number of miles driven have both doubled since 1970, the number of road deaths has fallen by 80 per cent in the same period.

In Sweden the government doesn't blame drivers for its road deaths, it takes responsibility. Roads in Sweden are built with safety prioritised over speed or convenience. Low urban speed-limits, pedestrian zones and barriers that separate cars from bikes and oncoming traffic have helped. Building 1,500 kilometres of "2+1" roads - where each lane of traffic takes turns to use a middle lane for overtaking - is thought to have saved about 145 lives over the first decade of Vision Zero. And 12,600 safer crossings, including pedestrian bridges and zebra-stripes flanked by flashing lights and protected with speed-bumps, are estimated to have halved the number of pedestrian deaths over the past five years. There is still an emphasis on driver responsibility with heavy policing of drink driving but road safety is considered a shared responsibility between government and the general public.

Australia is obviously different to Sweden. We have more people, a much larger country and more kilometres of roads. But surely we have a similar goal - imagine a New Year when we celebrate zero deaths on the road. It is not fiction, it could be our reality - and is certainly worth aiming for.

Mark Stevenson is director of the Monash University Accident Research Centre.

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