Drive on for zero road toll

Speed, inexperience, alcohol or other drugs, bad weather; all these contribute to fatal road accidents. But design is the biggest factor

BARRY COHEN

IN 1970, 3798 Australians were killed and 33,000 severely injured on our roads. The toll, a record that year, had increased almost every year as our population rose to what was then 12.5 million.

For many it was considered the price of progress. Then a strange thing happened. The road toll stopped rising, plateaued and then began to fall.

At that time, whatever standard used to measure it, Australia's toll was among the worst in the world. Few Western countries topped the traffic toll: 30.4 deaths per 100,000 population in 1970.

Had we continued at that rate a further 88,970 Australians would have died with 17 times that number seriously injured. But now, with a population of about 22 million, Australia's toll is about 1500 road deaths a year, or slightly under seven per 100,000 population. Why the dramatic drop? We stopped blaming drivers and allowed engineers and scientists to design safer highways and safer cars.

In 1971, in my booklet *The Australian Way of Death*, I wrote: "We know that drivers make mistakes. We know that at some stage during their driving career of 40 or 50 years they will have a momentary lapse in concentration, drive too fast, be distracted by someone inside or outside the car, drink too much or make any one of a thousand mistakes that could lead to an injury or death producing accident. The point is should they die for it?"

In 1965, Ralph Nader, in his book *Unsafe at Any Speed*, blew the whistle on the major car makers for ignoring the technology available to make cars safer, preferring instead to concentrate on style, speed and power.

His revelations led to US legislation that forced the redesign of the motor vehicle. Within a few years, collapsible steering columns, recessed instrument panels, strengthened side bars and air bags were among the many changes that enabled the occupants of a vehicle to survive dangerous crashes.

Australia made its contribution. In 1970 an all-party Victorian parliamentary committee recommended to the Bolte conservative government that they make the wearing of seatbelts compulsory. A furious debate broke out about people's right to kill themselves.

Fortunately the Victorian government ignored the pleading of the civil liberties lobby. Within months the drop in the road toll forced other states to follow suit. Noting Australia's success, other countries did the same. During the next decade, while the population increased, our annual road toll dropped from 3798 to 3274, a decrease of 524.

Our highways also improved. Before the 1972 election, I convinced Gough Whitlam that Labor should take road safety seriously. He announced that a Labor government would follow US president Dwight D. Eisenhower's example and build a national highway system linking the sectors that carried the bulk of interstate traffic between Australia's biggest cities. The Whitlam government began work on the national highway and funded the removal of notorious "black spots". Breathalysers were also introduced nationwide, taking the guesswork out of measuring alcohol consumption.

As each year passed, improved highways, seatbelts, safer vehicles and breathalysers saw the road toll continue to drop significantly. It was clear that the engineers and scientists had won the battle against "the behaviouralists".

If the latter had had their way almost 90,000 Australians would have died.

In 1966 Nader wrote: "It is faster, cheaper and more enduring to build operationally safe and crashworthy automobiles that will prevent death and injury than to build a policy around the impossible goal of having drivers behave perfectly at all time under all conditions in the operation of a basically unsafe vehicle and often treacherous highway conditions."

His comments are still valid. Due to the extraordinary advance in electronics, it is possible to look forward to the day when no one dies on our roads.

The new magazine *Intertraffic World* certainly thinks so. "Increasingly intelligent vehicles are navigating decades-old 'dumb' roads. Today's smart cars — sometimes equipped with as many as 65 sensors — have already taken over human tasks. They regulate speed, park themselves, map and find destinations, control skidding ... Soon, guided by high-precision internal maps and inertial sensors, they'll know their position precisely so they won't need lane marking for guidance. They'll communicate with other smart cars, enabling a swarm of closely spaced cars to move in unison."

Sweden's Volvo company, which has led the way in producing safer cars, asserts that by 2020 anyone buying a Volvo and obeying the road rules will not be killed. Volvo's aim is zero deaths by 2020. If Volvo can do it, why not all vehicle manufacturers?

Many in the car industry believe that relatively soon drivers will hop into their cars, press a few buttons and be driven to work while reading the paper. That won't happen overnight so we must continue to make the system safer with incremental changes.

The Australian New Car Assessment Program independently crash-tests vehicles to assess their safety. Cars are rated from one to five with four- and five-star ratings reducing fatalities by half. There is twice the chance of being killed in a one- or two-star-rated vehicle. Three named in a Victorian parliamentary committee report tabled last year on Australian Design Rules were the Proton Jumbuck (one star) and the Great Wall SA220 and V240 models (two stars).

It is questionable whether these vehicles should be allowed on Australian roads. Surely safety ratings should be more prominently displayed in car advertising. If everyone drove a five-star car a further 175 lives a year would be saved.

The other area in which advances are possible is highway construction. When two-lane roads are replaced by four-lane divided highways, the road toll on those roads drops by 70 per cent. The evidence lies in international experience and in the thousands of lives saved on the upgraded Hume and Pacific highways during the past 30 years. If the public wants to see the road toll slashed it should pressure governments to concentrate on building safer rather than faster highways.

Safer cars and roads will yield the best results but as the Australian Traffic Council's National Road Safety Action Plan 2009-2010 shows, there are dozens of other initiatives that would also help. It lists more than 100 measures that could be taken. Speed limiters, driver education, tougher law enforcement, increased surveillance, black spot remedial work, removal or protection from roadside obstacles, shoulder sealing, improved signage, the list is endless.

We know what needs to be done but how do we do it?

One obvious problem is the poor communications between those at the coal face of road safety research: the police, the bureaucrats, government, the media and the motoring public. They could start by using plain english.

Most of the distributed material on road safety is gobbledygook. The journalist and the public haven't the time to work their way through such turgid sludge.

No better example of poor communication exists than the practice of senior police imploring drivers not to drink and drive, to slow down and take regular rests.

It doesn't appear to have had any significant effect because, a few cranes aside, the majority of people drive sensibly 99.9 per cent of the time. As former US secretary of commerce John T. Connor said many years ago: "The great bulk of accidents involve average, normally responsible drivers. No one is immune. It is the accumulation of rare accidents, occurring to all too many generally good drivers that principally accounts for an annual traffic toll."

The police acknowledge they have a communication problem. Warning, pleading and threatening drivers doesn't work because the public believes that speed traps are simply revenue raisers. Not so, say the police. Every 2km/hr reduction in speed leads to an 8 per cent reduction in crashes. Why aren't police on television telling the motoring public?

Calls for further reductions in speed limits will lead to cries of outrage from the usual suspects. But that also happened when seatbelts, breathalysers and 50km/hr speed limits were introduced. Would further reduction in speed limits work? Why can't we try it for six months?

Modern technology is working miracles in reducing the road toll but it's also creating new problems. Mobile phones are the latest distraction but technology is available to switch them off when the car is running. So too with alcohol. The technology exists to stop people driving when they are over the 0.05g/litre alcohol/blood level. Speed limiters are also available. Why aren't both being used?

There is no silver bullet but there are dozens of mini-silver bullets that will reduce crashes and bring us closer to a zero road toll.

President of the Australian College of Road Safety, Lachlan McIntosh, who recently attended a 1500-strong road safety conference in Moscow, returned disappointed that there were only three Australians present and none of them were ministers. He asks, "When will our political leaders have the courage to make road safety as important as climate change or gun control?" Should one add swine flu?

Where is Australia's Nader and a government and public demanding further action? Can we do it? To coin a phrase, yes we can.

Barry Cohen, a former minister, was chairman of the House of Representatives road safety committee 1972-75.

LAUNCON HARLEY

Computer-controlled vehicles and better highways are part of the future. Above, a danger spot at Tarcutta in southern NSW in 2004

How lives have been saved

Decade	Actual deaths	Anticipated deaths*
1970-79	36,129	38,590
1980-89	29,711	44,106
1990-99	19,572	50,344
2000-09	16,277	56,909
Total	**101,689**	**189,659**

* Anticipated at an annual rate of 38 dead per 100,000 population

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