

Drivers' road skills fail against roads that kill

What's really killing our P-platers: driver stupidity or RTA neglect, asks Fred Nile.

OCTOBER 23, 2006: Four school friends are killed near Byron Bay when their car crashes into trees in the rain.

October 27: A 16-year-old suffers critical spinal injuries when a car driven by a learner hits a telegraph pole in Orchard Hills.

November 5: A 19-year-old is killed when her car hits a tree and bursts into flames.

November 25: A 22-year-old driver dies when his car hits a power pole at Woodberry, near Maitland.

November 30: A 19-year-old P-plater is seriously injured when her car hits a telegraph pole on Bonds Road, Punchbowl.

December 2: A young motorcyclist dies after hitting a telegraph pole in Dubbo.

After reviewing more than 200 news reports of 54 P-plate accidents, one recurring theme emerged – motorists are killed when they hit large, hard objects. Behind that simplistic, self-evident comment is a fundamental truth: while driver training, policing and licence restrictions all play a part in reducing fatalities, probably the most significant single factor in accidents involving inexperienced drivers is road design, road neglect and the number of lethal hazards lining the sides of our roads.

NSW roads are kilometres behind world's best practice and you can't help but wonder why. Canberra suburban streets are wide dual carriageways lined with flexible bushes and crumple-zoned metal street lights, both of which disperse deadly g-forces on impact. Most Canberra power supply has been put underground.

In Sweden, road fatalities were reduced by a massive 90 per cent when flexible barriers were installed around obvious roadside hazards. In Australia, we still use unforgiving concrete or, in most cases, no barrier at all.

Flexible barriers are expensive to install and maintain, as are crumple-zone power poles, but if we're really serious about reducing



ANOTHER ACCIDENT: Deaths will climb until we start making roads for people who aren't perfect.

road deaths, should mere economics be the excuse to sit on our hands?

We still have large numbers of huge trucks and buses passing each other at high speeds on ridiculously narrow main arteries. We continue to have cars and massive industrial vehicles interfacing with virtually no traffic managing devices at known black spots. The location of the recent Glendinning P-plate tragedy was one such intersection.

I recently drove the seven-kilometre stretch from Toronto to the F3. This 100 kmh goat track is the only thoroughfare to the freeway. It is dangerously narrow and dotted with literally hundreds of incredibly lethal roadside hazards.

These include huge unbarriered gum trees on sharp curves, steep ditches, concrete stormwater pipes, river embankments and the mandatory timber power pole every 50 metres or so. Any driver error and you're playing Russian roulette with the RTA.

The real concern is that road is replicated throughout NSW – dark at

night, slippery when wet and difficult to negotiate for the unfamiliar. Beyond road design, there is also the question of RTA support for policing.

Among the NRMA's worst 50 NSW black spots for the past four years, only one has an RTA speed camera within 400 metres. Only eight have red-light cameras.

Two of the top three "black lengths" – Epping Road and King Georges Road – have no speed cameras at all. These two roads account for 15 of the state's most notorious crash sites and an average 600 accidents a year, yet they have just six red-light cameras between them.

Such figures infer that the RTA's speed camera policy is driven by something other than the desire to reduce collisions.

The P-plate debate, thus far, has concentrated on the driver – train them better, restrict them harder, force them to carry fewer passengers. These are legitimate avenues to explore. But none of it

will come to much if we don't minimise the death-traps that remain within the very design of our roads.

A recent report on ABC's *Catalyst* stated: "The mistake is, we design roads for people who do the right thing. We need to design for people who aren't perfect." The implication is that if we replicated Sweden's experience, Australia could save 620 lives a year, as well as countless injuries and heartache.

It's inescapable – people speed, drink-drive, lack experience or fall asleep at the wheel. In almost all other areas of social policy, when citizens are naive, stupid or break the law, expensive harm-minimisation is the mantra – but not, it seems, on our roads.

Please drive very safely these holidays.

Reverend Fred Nile, a Christian Democratic Party representative in the NSW Legislative Council, is chairman of the NSW General Purposes Committee.

Tide out on patience as Pacific claims keys

I WAS going to write about something earnest today, like global warming or Iraq or whether a sequined Mark Latham on *Dancing with the Stars* constitutes a crime against humanity.

But the plan went out the window in favour of the *Wish I Hadn't Done That* Alert of Summer 2006/07 after two incidents on the weekend.

The first involved a beach, a car, a woman, two men, two children, and I can't even tell you the outcome. I can only relate the sad unfolding of events as I observed them while walking the dog as the sun beat down on Sunday afternoon.

The five people had made a reasonably long trek from the beach back to the car. You can picture the look – the adults were lugging the fold-up tent, the umbrella, a couple of recliner chairs, towels and a bag with sunblock, drinks and the rest of the junk you usually lug across the



Joanne McCarthy

burning sand for a refreshing hour-long paddle in the waves.

The kids walked back with their heads down, letting out little bleats about being "Hungry, thirsty, tired, bored", which the adults ignored just like they tell you to in the good parenting guides.

They reached the car in the car park. I didn't really pay much attention until one of the men asked the woman for the car keys.

"I don't have them. I gave them to you," she said.

The man looked at her. "No. I gave them to you. Remember I asked you to put them in the bag," he said.

"I know. But I gave them back to

you when you went to get your book," she said.

I was glad the dog had gone off to pee on something because it gave me an excuse to hang around and casually observe what happened next. For human behaviour research purposes, of course.

The man looked at the woman. "Please tell me you're joking," he said.

"I only wish I was," she replied.

Both kids, who looked about 10, came out with "Oh, no" round about then, when the little party of five looked at the ground they'd covered from beach to car park, and realised they had to retrace every one of their steps to find one small set of keys on one very large beach.

It was at that point the man acknowledged he had used the keys when he went back to the car, and had possibly put them into the pocket of his board shorts before

walking back to the group and *having a swim because he was so hot.*

Which is when they realised their search had broadened to include a chunk of the Pacific Ocean.

We parted company when they went off in one direction, heads down, all sandy and sweating, the kids softly whining, and I went the other.

Wish I Hadn't Done That Alert number one: don't ever be blasé about your keys, especially on the beach on a stinking hot day. And especially with little kids.

Warning number two, after an incident featuring two bottles of beer and a freezer?

If someone this summer says they're going to give any carbonated drink "a bit of a blast in the freezer" for a few minutes, *just say no.*

Trust me on this one.

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Topics today



Today's fact

A group of camels is called a caravan.

Today's word

Reticent (ret-ih-suhnt): Disposed to be silent; restrained or reserved in style.

It happened today

From our files – 1967: One of the first victims of a police crackdown on illegal parking in the shopping centre of Cessnock was the Mayor, Ald Brown.

Today in history

1688: William of Orange enters London.

1776: Thomas Paine publishes his first *American Crisis* essay, writing: "These are the times that try men's souls."

1843: Charles Dickens's classic yuletide tale *A Christmas Carol* is first published in England.

1865: Chinese bushranger Sam Poo is hanged in NSW.

1931: Joseph Lyons becomes prime minister after leading his new United Australia Party to victory over Labor.

1972: US Apollo 17 spacecraft splashes down on target in Pacific Ocean, ending US program of landing men on moon.

1991: Paul Keating defeats Bob Hawke in ALP leadership ballot and becomes prime minister.

1998: The US House of Representatives impeaches president Bill Clinton for obstructing justice and lying under oath about his sexual affair with Monica Lewinsky.

Born today

Su Tung-p'o, Chinese poet (1036-1101); **Sir Ralph Richardson**, British actor (1902-1983); **Leonid Brezhnev**, Soviet

Communist Party chief (1906-1982); **Jean Genet**, French writer (1910-1986); **Kevan Gosper**, Australian athlete and International Olympic

Committee member (1933-); **Ricky Ponting**, pictured, Australian cricketer (1974-); **Jake Gyllenhaal**, US actor (1980-).



Odd Spot

A Hindu wedding ceremony of 18 dogs has been called off in India after headline religious groups and animal rights activists said it was a mockery of the religion and cruel to the canines.

Today's text

Before the world was created the Word already existed. He was with God and He was the same as God. **John 1:1**