Safe cycling in London

Westminster Hall debate
26 November 2013

The British Medical Association (BMA) is an independent trade union and voluntary professional association which represents doctors from all branches of medicine across the UK. It has a total membership of over 156,000.

Background
The BMA published a report ‘Healthy transport = Healthy lives’ in July 2012, which sets out the case for re-focusing transport policy in the UK to prioritise active forms of travel, such as cycling and walking. Cycling is a form of physical activity, and can therefore provide substantial benefits to an individual’s health and mental wellbeing.

Some facts about the benefits of physical activity:

- Physical activity can reduce the risk of several types of cancer, including cancers of the breast, colon, prostate, and endometrium.
- Regular physical activity is a protective factor for, and reduces the risk of, cardiovascular diseases, including chronic heart disease (CHD) and stroke.
- Physical activity is a key element in maintaining healthy weight and the prevention of weight gain.
- Physical activity can increase bone mineral density in adolescents, maintain it throughout adulthood, and slow its decline in old age.
- Physical activity has a role to play in the prevention and management of diabetes.
- Regular physical activity has psychological health benefits, and can lead to improvements in self-esteem and mood, and reduced anger, depression and anxiety.

Cycling is also an effective way of integrating, and increasing, levels of physical activity in everyday life for the majority of the population, at little personal or societal cost. This is particularly important in light of the low proportion of UK adults that engage in recommended levels of physical activity.

Cycling levels
In the last 60 years, there has been a significant shift in travel behaviour towards increasing car use, which is seen by many as their primary means of transportation for short and long-distance journeys. Over the same period, levels of cycling across the UK have decreased significantly. The average distance walked or cycled per person per year, has declined over the past three decades. However, unlike other areas in the UK that are generally seeing decreasing levels of cycling, London is experiencing increasing cycling levels, which is attributed to London having a higher standard of cycling infrastructure and continual investment compared to other parts of the country.

Cycling safety
The increase in traffic density on UK roads has led to an increase in the risk of injury to cyclists, who experience a high rate of injury by distance travelled. A survey of road traffic incidents from 2010 found that per million kilometres cycled, 0.022 cyclists are killed in road traffic crashes. However, in spite of the harms cyclists are exposed to in terms of safety and air pollution, a number of studies have concluded that the health benefits greatly outweigh the risks by a factor of 2 to 1.
Crossing junctions present the greatest casualty risk to cyclists\textsuperscript{33} and worldwide, in collisions involving cyclists and motor vehicles, a higher proportion of cyclists are killed than drivers.\textsuperscript{34} A major risk to cyclists is posed by freight vehicles, which are 20 times more likely to be involved in cyclist road traffic injuries than cars, per kilometre travelled.\textsuperscript{25,36} Research on cyclist fatality rates in London between 1992 and 2006 has shown that freight vehicles were involved in more than four out of ten incidents.\textsuperscript{37} It has been suggested that in order to reduce the risk of freight vehicles to cyclists freight should have restricted access to urban roads, and alternate means of delivering essential goods found. This may include river or rail transport bringing goods into urban environments and light goods vehicles then being utilised for local distribution.

In order to reduce the risks cyclists face on the roads, the BMA believes there is a need for a modal shift in transport policy through comprehensive measures to reduce the demand and need to travel by car. This includes recommended action in the following areas:

- **Road safety should be addressed at a strategic level through a danger reduction approach that addresses the factors that put cyclists at risk, rather than seeking to reduce casualties by limiting cyclists from making the trips they need to undertake.**

- **Accessibility should be prioritised over mobility in planning decisions to ensure local facilities and services are easily and safely accessible by bicycle.**

- **A range of comprehensive measures are needed to reduce congestion and improving usability of roads by cyclists, including reallocation of road space, restricting motor vehicle access, road-user charging schemes, and traffic-calming and traffic management (including area-wide 20 miles per hour speed limits).**

- **There should be provision of a comprehensive network of routes for walking, cycling and using other modes of active travel that offer everyone (including people whose mobility is impaired) convenient, safe, well-designed and direct access to workplaces, homes, schools and other public facilities.**

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References