

**ROYAL AUSTRALASIAN COLLEGE OF SURGEONS**

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**NORTHERN TERRITORY 'TOWARDS ZERO'  
ROAD SAFETY ACTION PLAN**

**JUNE 2017**

## INTRODUCTION

The Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) is the leading advocate for surgical standards, professionalism and surgical education in New Zealand and Australia. RACS is a not-for-profit organisation that represents more than 7000 surgeons and 1300 surgical trainees and international medical graduates across New Zealand and Australia. It also supports healthcare and surgical education in the Asia-Pacific region and is a substantial funder of surgical research.

RACS provides training in nine surgical specialties, cardiothoracic surgery, general surgery, neurosurgery, orthopaedic surgery, otolaryngology head and neck surgery, paediatric surgery, plastic and reconstructive surgery, urology and vascular surgery. The College plays an active role in the setting of standards of surgical care, the training of surgeons and their participation in continuing medical education throughout their lifetime of surgical practice.

As part of our commitment to standards and professionalism RACS strives to take informed and principled positions on issues associated with the delivery of health services. RACS has a long history of road safety advocacy. We regularly revise and update our positions in accordance with safety measures that undergo ongoing research and development by a large 'road safety' industry. RACS has been influential with policy makers and legislators and was a major contributor towards mandatory seat-belt wearing, drink driving countermeasures and the compulsory wearing of helmets by pedal cyclists.

Over the past three years in particular, RACS has been vocal about improving road safety standards in the Northern Territory. We were deeply concerned by the reintroduction of open speed limits in 2014, and advocated strongly against this reckless policy. The Government is to be commended for taking a principled stance on this issue and for swiftly reintroducing speed limits following their election. However, it is important that momentum is not lost and that the Government continues to prioritise road safety as a critical area of public policy.

While restrictions on speed are an important safety measure, they are one component of a much broader road safety strategy. Other factors include raising community awareness and promoting safer driving practices, and investing in infrastructure projects that will enhance the quality and condition of Northern Territory roads. The National Road Safety Strategy 2011-2020 (NRSS), to which the Northern Territory Government is a signatory, analyses road safety risks in terms of the elements of the Safe Systems Approach to Road Safety and makes strong recommendations as to how individual components of these major elements can contribute to reductions in fatalities and serious injuries. The comprehensive discussion paper that has been developed by the Northern Territory Government appears to reflect this mindset. We hope that this will lead to meaningful policy development and promote a safer driving culture, and most importantly save lives.

Our response is divided in to the following six sections as per the discussion paper:

1. Alcohol and Drugs
2. Seatbelts and Child Restraints
3. Speed and Driving Conditions
4. Roads and Roadsides
5. Vulnerable Road Users
6. Other Key Actions

## 1. Alcohol and Drugs

### Alcohol

Alcohol-related trauma in the Northern Territory (and across Australia and New Zealand) is a major issue and RACS has a strong position on strategies to reduce this devastation. This is outlined in our position paper on [Alcohol-related Harm](#) and includes key recommendations on:

- Restricting the physical availability of alcohol (Hours and Outlets)
- Restricting the economic availability of alcohol (Taxes)
- Reduce exposure
- Ensuring adequate data collection

It is not surprising that the Northern Territory has the worst road safety record of any Australian jurisdiction given that it also has the highest per capita consumption rate in Australia.<sup>1</sup> As highlighted in the discussion paper, there is a strong correlation between alcohol misuse and road trauma, with alcohol alarmingly named as a contributing factor in 44% of road deaths.

The evidence repeatedly shows that alcohol is a significant impairment on an individual's driving skills, including their reaction time and decision-making. While impairment increases significantly as a person's blood alcohol concentration (BAC) increases, according to studies there is no threshold of blood alcohol level below which impairment does not occur.<sup>2</sup>

The discussion paper also highlights the alarming number of drink driving offences that are committed by drivers with at least one prior conviction. This implies that existing sanctions have not proven enough of a deterrent and that there is a role for increasing public awareness about the dangers associated with drinking and driving.

It is important to highlight the need for personal responsibility, but ultimately safe drinking practices are everybody's responsibility. As an example, entertainment precincts attract large groups of people with distinct peaks during the evenings and early hours and particularly on weekends. It is imperative that licensed venues serve alcohol in a responsible manner, and that adequate transport options are available to discourage patrons from engaging in risk taking behaviour. This includes drink driving or walking long distances while intoxicated given the rise of road accidents involving intoxicated pedestrians.

#### RACS Recommends:

- Improved drink driving education programs dealing with the effects of alcohol on driving skills and the incidence of road crashes, and a commitment for ongoing funding for these campaigns. Further programs educating drinkers on the amount of alcohol consumption which will lead to the legal limit being exceeded.
- The law of 0.05 BAC for fully licensed drivers and riders should remain in place. However, investigation and research into the potential for the lowering of the 0.05 general BAC limit should also be explored.
- A zero percent BAC limit should be maintained for all license classifications where this is the current standard (ie learner and provisional licenses, commercial vehicles).
- Alcohol ignition interlocks be fitted to commercial vehicles such as trucks, passenger coaches and buses, taxis, trams and trains as well as operators and/or drivers of machinery.
- Intensification of random breath testing of drivers and riders.
- All road casualties of 16 years or older who attend hospital for treatment be tested for blood alcohol for both evidentiary purposes and for data collection for further research to inform future policy.
- That driver's and rider's licence tests include testing of knowledge of the effects of alcohol on driving skills, the role of alcohol in road crashes and the amount of alcohol consumption which will lead to the legal limit being exceeded.
- Increased public transport options be investigated for entertainment precincts to discourage people from engaging in drink driving.
- We recommend that special attention is paid to alcohol impaired pedestrians.
- Corporations be encouraged to develop responsible drink driving programs including driver education and the fitting of alcohol ignition interlocks to their vehicle fleet.

- That suitable breath alcohol testing devices (hand-held, coin-in-slot machines) be installed in hotels, restaurants and clubs.
- Relicensing of a driver or rider disqualified for having a BAC above 0.15g/100mls, or for a second or subsequent drink driving offence, be restricted to drive only vehicles fitted with an alcohol ignition interlock for a specified time as recommended by further research – and rehabilitation be encouraged for such recidivists.

***Drugs***

Other drugs taken alone or in combination with alcohol may seriously impair driving and riding ability, this includes both prescription medication and illicit drug use.

**RACS Recommends:**

- Continued research and improved data collection through the testing of all road traffic casualties whereby the effect on driving performance of drugs, whether prescribed, sold without prescription or illegal, when taken with or without alcohol, may be measured.
- Support for improved methods of detection of any medications or drugs which result in impairment of judgment and such tests be performed on all road casualties.
- Support for improved methods of detection at the roadside, of medications or drugs which result in impairment of judgment,
- Support for the intensification of the random drug testing of drivers and riders and that the results for initial roadside tests be confirmed via analysis of urine or blood samples.
- Guidelines for doctors and pharmacists to enable them to properly warn patients concerning any likely impairment of driving or riding skills which may result from the taking of a particular drug or other substance, separately or in combination, and all such drugs that may diminish or impair driving performance be labelled by the manufacturers and pharmacists with appropriate warning.
- Programs to educate that a person using prescription drugs that may cause impairment with or without the addition of alcohol should not consume any alcohol then drive or ride, and should maintain safe pedestrian practices.

## 2. Seatbelts and Child Restraints

Following decade's worth of Australian and International research, the evidence is irrefutable that seatbelts and child restraints save lives. Despite this more than 40% of road fatalities in the Northern Territory are related to failure to wear seatbelts or use appropriate child restraints. RACS supports the Government's proposal to increase targeted advertising to highlight the dangers associated with not wearing seatbelts. Research demonstrates that advertising campaigns are most effective when combined with increased enforcement activity.

### RACS Recommends:

- Targeted education and awareness campaigns regarding seatbelts, with particular emphasis on road user groups identified in the discussion paper as being substantially overrepresented in road fatality figures. Such campaigns should promote "one person per seat, correctly seated and restrained."
- Increased enforcement activity to support awareness campaigns and to ensure greater compliance with both drivers and passengers
- Mandatory wearing of approved seat belts in motor vehicle including all non-route service buses and for route service buses operating above 80 km/h
- Mandatory wearing of approved child restraints and use of booster seats for all children up to 135 cm.
- Rapid introduction of life-saving technologies in all new cars, and policies which encourage consumer uptake of newer vehicles
- The Northern Territory Government work with the Australian Government to ensure that vehicle safety features such as, but not limited to, front, side and curtain airbags, anti-lock braking systems, electronic stability control and aggressive seat belt reminder systems and autonomous emergency braking be installed in all new cars.
- Accessible and sustainable Government loan and community-based schemes that are designed to improve availability of approved infant and child restraints.

### 3. Speed and Driving Conditions

#### *Speed*

RACS was particularly critical of the previous unrestricted speed policy as it appeared to place all the responsibility on individual motorists to drive to conditions, while seemingly ignoring that there will always be a cohort of inexperienced drivers or drivers unfamiliar with the road. The reintroduction of speed limits is a vital component of the Safe Systems approach, and we again congratulate the Government for accepting this responsibility. However, we still hold concerns that the 130 km/h speed limit on national highways is still 20 km/h faster than the maximum speed limit in any other Australian jurisdiction.

Research shows that a 5% increase in speed leads to a 15% increase in serious injury crashes and a 22% increase in fatal crashes.<sup>3</sup> According to the Northern Territory Government's own figures, speed was listed as a contributing factor in a quarter of road fatalities over the past decade, and almost a third of all road fatalities in 2015.<sup>4</sup> We acknowledge that the political climate in the Northern Territory makes it very difficult for any further reductions in speed to be implemented. Despite this, we encourage the Government to continue to monitor the effectiveness of 130 km/h speed limits, and we recommend a long term policy approach of working towards 110 km/h maximum speed limits.

The Northern Territory has lagged behind other jurisdictions in implementing appropriate speed limits in built up areas. As highlighted in the discussion paper, speed related road trauma is most common in urban centres. Over the past two decades all Australian Governments have taken action to reduce speed limits except for the Northern Territory. The NT is the only jurisdiction where a 60 km/h default speed limit still applies in built up areas. This is despite overwhelming evidence internationally and across Australia that reducing the speed limit to 50 km/h significantly reduces road accidents and deaths. Studies also show that by lowering speed limits to 50 km/h in built up areas, drivers were commonly found to also lower their speeds when traveling in 60 km/h speed zones.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Point-to-point speed enforcement*

Point-to-point speed cameras involve measuring the average speed of vehicles over long distances, and are an effective way of encouraging safe driving speeds. This is particularly relevant in the Northern Territory context given the long stretches of isolated roads, and the difficulties involved in enforcing safe speed limits in these areas. Point-to-point enforcement promotes area-wide suppression of speeding because speed enforcement is sustained over a length of road rather than just a single spot. Research conducted in Europe has shown a 33 - 85% reduction in fatal and serious crashes after point-to-point enforcement was installed.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the NRSS states that point-to-point speed enforcement has a high level of public support. It has been described as fairer than spot speed enforcement because speeding is detected over a greater distance,<sup>7</sup> demonstrating the behaviour may be intentional and not due to a momentary lapse of concentration.

#### **RACS Recommends:**

- **Continued opposition to unrestricted speed limits and maintenance of 130 km/h maximum speeds**
- **Consideration is given to a long term policy objective of bringing Northern Territory maximum speed limits in line with other Australian jurisdictions**
- **Introduction of Point to point speed cameras in rural and remote areas of the Northern Territory**
- **General speed limits in suburban areas are reduced to 50 km/h except on major arterial roads**
- **Enforcement programs and initiatives are intensified so that there will be a higher chance of detection and penalties for drivers and riders who exceed the speed limit**
- **Clear signage indicating changes in speed limits are prominently displayed on all roads.**

***Mobile Phone Usage***

Alarmingly just under half of Australians admit to using their mobile phones while driving, while one-quarter admit to using their phones regularly.<sup>8</sup> Statistics have shown that road users who use their phone while driving are four times more likely to be involved in a crash.<sup>9</sup> The current \$250 penalty for using a hand held mobile phone while driving is the lowest of any Australian jurisdiction. The next lowest is Tasmania which fines its drivers \$300, while Victoria has the highest penalty of \$466.<sup>10</sup>

- **Increased financial and demerit penalties for the use of mobile phones while driving**
- **Increased enforcement initiatives**
- **Greater awareness and education campaigns regarding the dangers associated with mobile phone use while driving – with particular attention to pedestrians, cyclists and motorcycle riders, the most vulnerable road users.**

#### 4. Road and Roadsides

According to the most recent report of the Australian Road Assessment Program, approximately 30% of Northern Territory highways are rated as 'high risk.' Even the best highway sections in the Northern Territory were rated as either 'medium' or 'medium-high' risk. Based on the findings of the report, the Automobile Association has recommended that approximately \$200 million be invested to upgrade the road network.

RACS appreciates the difficulties associated with maintaining Northern Territory roads given the large geographic area and the low population density. However, failure to invest in adequate safety measures that will ultimately result in significant savings and save lives is unacceptable. NT roads are almost invariably single lane, undivided and do not have safety barriers. Many are also unsealed, subject to the extremes of weather and are often exposed to wandering livestock and wildlife. The risks are exacerbated by the isolated nature of many roads meaning that many victims may not be found for many hours after an accident.

The Northern Territory and Commonwealth Governments have committed to working in partnership and to mitigating wherever possible the inherent risks posed by Northern Territory roads. RACS encourages both Governments to consult the available data and to conduct additional risk assessments to guide the most effective safety upgrades.

**RACS Recommends:**

- Consult available risk assessments of the national highway network, as well as engage in additional assessment where appropriate.
- The Northern Territory and Australian Governments invest significantly in the national highway network to ensure that all medium and high risk roads are upgraded to low risk status
- Continued investment in urban and regional roads as required
- Development of a long term infrastructure plan so that investment is coordinated and less likely to be impacted by changing government cycles

## 5. Vulnerable Road Users

### *Indigenous Road Users*

Indigenous infants, children and adults are all much more likely to have a fatal transport-related injury than their non- Indigenous Australian peers. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who die have more often been a vehicle passenger or a pedestrian. Overall the risk factors – environment-related, vehicle related and behavioural – are different to the rest of the population. Indigenous people have generally not experienced the reduction in road fatalities in the non-Indigenous Australian population caused by effective road safety interventions. Our understanding of why this is the case is limited by suboptimal data collection, especially in remote areas, and insufficient evaluation of new interventions.

Action is needed to pursue relatively inexpensive programs to address the most troublesome areas. Multi-faceted programs are required to enforce laws and to address the complex social problems that underlie issues such as drink driving, speeding and not using restraints. Research is urgently needed to better understand Indigenous road injury, to work out why mainstream interventions have not been successful, and to tailor and evaluate new programs accordingly.

### **RACS Recommends:**

- **Further research and investigation as to why behaviours such as seat belt non-use and driving under the influence of alcohol, are more prevalent among the Indigenous than non-Indigenous population**
- **Further investigation in to why otherwise successful mainstream road safety programs have had little or reduced impact on Indigenous communities.**
- **Based on research invest in more targeted culturally appropriate campaigns and educational programs**

### *Young Drivers*

While RACS supports any education campaign that will encourage its audience to consider the consequence of their actions, we have been particularly supportive of the Prevent Alcohol and Risk Related Trauma in Youth (P.A.R.T.Y) program. To date the Northern Territory is the only jurisdiction in Australia where the P.A.R.T.Y program has yet to be launched. Below is an excerpt from our submission to the Review of the Road Safety Action Plan.

One of the worst things a surgeon or any other medical professional will ever have to do in their job is to tell a young person's parents that their child has been killed in a car accident, or fallen off a balcony because they've had too much alcohol. It's tragic, and it's preventable. As part of the P.A.R.T.Y program students follow the journey of a trauma patient from occurrence right through to rehabilitation. Throughout the process they interact with medical teams, patients and families of trauma victims. The aim is to educate students and to provide them with a different perspective. At times the program can be confronting and emotional, but most importantly it is highly effective. Students often report a change in attitude and that the interactive nature of the program has given them greater comprehension of the consequences that can occur when they engage in risk-related behavior. Participation has been associated with a reduced subsequent risk of committing violence- or traffic-related offences, injuries, and death, including among juvenile justice offenders.

The P.A.R.T.Y program is a relatively low cost/high impact program. As an example, the Western Australian Government recently provided \$402,000 worth of funding to allow the program to remain operational throughout 2016-2017, and announced that further funding has been underwritten for the program until 2020. This is significantly lower than the ongoing health costs of road trauma victims.

RACS also has a number of established positions aimed at reducing the risk of road trauma in younger drivers. These are included in the below recommendations.

**RACS recommends:**

- The application of a graduated licensing system whereby newly licensed drivers have a period of time in which to gain experience
- Increasing the probationary period to an age which research shows a greater ability to assess risks, control impulsive behaviour and handle distractions
- A national minimum learner driver age of 16 years and at least 120 hours of supervised pre-licence driving (a minimum of 10% of these to be with a fully qualified driving instructor) in varying conditions
- A national minimum probationary driving age of 18 years
- Passenger restrictions, particularly in the first year of licenced driving
- Night time curfews, particularly in the first year of licenced driving
- Prohibition of use of telephones within motor vehicles by learner or probationary drivers
- Vehicle power restrictions for all learner and probationary drivers
- A graded demerit point allowance system for drivers up to the age of 25 years
- Mandate basic first aid training as part of the driver licensing system

*Motorcycles*

After a crash motorcycle death and injury rates are significantly higher than those involving motor vehicles. Research clearly shows increasing alcohol content (BAC) increases the risk of motorcycle crash, injury and fatality rates, with riders at 0.05% BAC having 165 times the fatal crash risk than a car or van driver at the same BAC level.<sup>11</sup> RACS supports the following strategies to reduce the risk of death or injury to motorcycle riders.

**RACS recommends:**

- Mandatory wearing of approved helmets by all motorcycle riders and pillion passengers on and off public roads – with no exemptions on medical grounds
- Support for further research into injury patterns of motorcycle riders, pillion and sidecar passengers and motorcycle protective clothing suitable for Australasian conditions
- Support for further research into the effectiveness of Daytime Running Lights for all motorcycles
- Support for further development and research into other safety features such as motorcycle airbags, airbag jackets, ABS (automatic braking systems)
- Motorcycle licensing programs to take into account the higher levels of vehicle control and cognitive skill required to ride a motorcycle compared to driving a vehicle
- Support for graduated licensing programs which require a minimum age for solo riding equal to the minimum age for obtaining a probationary car driver's licence with longer probationary periods
- 0.02% BAC for motorcycle riders, recognising the effect of alcohol on motorcycle rider safety.

*Pedal cycling*

The Northern Territory is the only jurisdiction where mandatory helmet wearing does not apply to all cyclists. While cyclists traveling on roads must wear helmets, there is no requirement for cyclists traveling on footpaths or bike paths (not attached to roads) to do so. The very nature of cycling makes riders extremely vulnerable to injury either by falls or collisions. The available evidence clearly indicates that helmets save lives and significantly reduces the impact of head trauma. For more information we would like to draw your attention to a [joint submission RACS made to a Senate Reference Committee in 2015](#).

**RACS recommends:**

- Mandatory helmet wearing laws are introduced for all Northern Territory cyclists
- A local campaign continuing the promotion of bicycle helmet wearing through community road safety councils, municipal councils, school authorities and parents
- Expansion of bicycle path networks in cooperation with local government and other agencies, supporting those networks that separate motor vehicles, bicycles and pedestrians
- Mandatory use of approved tail lights, fixed reflectors, light-coloured clothing and reflectors on clothing and helmets particularly for night cycling.
- Support for initiatives which encourage all road users to 'share the road'
- Development of national primary school bicycle education programs

### Foreign Drivers

Foreign drivers continue to be overrepresented in crash and fatality statistics in the Northern Territory, especially when compared with other jurisdictions.

#### RACS recommends:

- Awareness campaigns aimed at highlighting the unique nature of Northern Territory roads and the need for vigilance
- The Government continues to support initiatives aimed at promoting safety such as “Keep left” stickers. We encourage the Government to provide these stickers free to all hire cars, and for them to be prominently displayed in these vehicles.

## 6. Other Key Actions

In addition to our comments and recommendations throughout this submission we also draw the Government's attention to our response to the Alcohol Policies and Legislation Review. The review of road safety recognises the link between alcohol and road trauma and it is important that these two reviews do not occur in isolation and result in a coordinated policy approach.

RACS also has a position paper on [Road Trauma prevention](#). Although the content of this position paper is largely reflected throughout our submission, it also contains additional recommendations on frontal protection systems, vehicle safety and railway crossings. We encourage the Government to also consider these recommendations as part of the review.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Justice, NT Wholesale Alcohol Supply 2008-2015. 2015. From:  
[https://justice.nt.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/word\\_doc/0008/396062/NT-wholesale-alcohol-supply\\_2008-2015.docx](https://justice.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/word_doc/0008/396062/NT-wholesale-alcohol-supply_2008-2015.docx). Accessed: 22/6/17.

<sup>2</sup> Oden., E. Moskowitz, H. Effects of alcohol and other drugs on driver performance. 2004.

<sup>3</sup> National Road Safety Strategy 2011-2020, p59.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Transport. Northern Territory 2015 Road Injury Statistical Summary. 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Monash University. The Impact of Lowered Speed Limits in Urban and Metropolitan Areas. 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Austroads. Point-to-point speed enforcement. 2012. From: <https://www.onlinpublications.austroads.com.au/>. Accessed 22/6/17.

<sup>7</sup> National Road Safety Strategy 2011-2020, p62.

<sup>8</sup> Deloitte. Mobile Consumer Survey. 2015.

<sup>9</sup> McEvoy, S., Stevenson, M., McCartt, A., Woodward, M., Haworth, C., Palamara, P. and Cercarelli, R. Role of mobile phones in motor vehicle crashes resulting in hospital attendance: a case-crossover study. BMJ 331: 428-30.

<sup>10</sup> Various State and Territory Government Transport websites

<sup>11</sup> Transport and Road Safety Research Centre. Motorcycle Safety in NSW. 2015. From

<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/inquiries/Pages/inquiry-submission-details.aspx?pk=%2046271>. Accessed: 28/6/17