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# Vision Australia

# Presentation to 2023 Trauma Symposium

# E-Mobility: Current perspectives and Future Directions

## Brisbane 17 November 2023

Twenty years ago I began my journey to work each morning by walking from the unit block where I lived to the nearby railway station. For me as a blind person it wasn’t a walk in the park: I had to cross a busy service station driveway, and then negotiate an even busier main road crossing that included diagonal kerbs and unrestricted turning lanes. But the part of my pedestrian journey that filled me with dread was when I walked under a canopy over the footpath that was formed by the interlocking branches of two large trees. A community of Indian Myna birds found this canopy a most congenial place to nest. Walking into the space under the canopy was like entering a bat cave. And once I was in there the Mynas would drop things on my head: nuts, twigs, leaves and, well, Mynas are full of shit.

So one day in desperation I phoned the local council and explained the situation. I asked whether they could trim the tree branches. “oh no no no – they are heritage trees and we can’t touch them at all”. “then what do you suggest I do”, I asked. “Wear a hat”, was the reply.

The ironic aspect of this whole experience is that a couple of years later the trees and the Myna birds suddenly disappeared. Apparently a property developer had applied to remove them to improve access to a new unit block. If only I had pursued a career in real estate instead of disability policy. And it just goes to show that local councils and Mynas have more than a little in common.

Looking back on that time in light of the current challenges for pedestrians who are blind or have low vision, my journey each day to the railway station feels like a minor inconvenience. The biggest hazards we face now when walking along the footpath are not squawking birds but silent e-scooters; they aren’t nuts and leaves dropped on our heads, but careless riders allowed to go way too fast who will drop us on our heads and maybe kill us if they collide with us.

Vision Australia is the largest provider of services to people who are blind or have low vision in Australia. We deliver services to more than 26,000 clients each year. With our extensive client network we’re able to carry out research into the lived experience of the blind and low vision community. The evidence from our research helps us advocate for the removal of discriminatory, socially-constructed barriers on the path to a more inclusive society.

In 2018 Vision Australia commissioned research by Monash University to study the impact of electric/hybrid vehicles and bicycles on the safety of pedestrians who are blind or have low vision. A key and alarming finding was that 35% of respondents had been involved in a collision or near-collision with an electric vehicle. Just as disturbing was the effect on people’s mental and emotional wellbeing: 75% said that the introduction of electric vehicle technologies had reduced their confidence to leave their houses to walk around outside. In a nutshell, the problem is that electric vehicles are silent, especially at low speeds, and so we can’t hear them when we’re crossing roads, or walking through carparks and across driveways.

The findings from this research formed the evidence base for our systemic advocacy campaign to make acoustic vehicle alerting systems mandatory on all electric vehicles in Australia. We’re hopeful that the consultation undertaken by the Commonwealth Government earlier this year will achieve this result.

By 2021 there was growing concern in the blind and low vision community about the sudden and seemingly disorganised and unregulated proliferation of e-scooters, e-bikes and other e-rideables on pedestrian footpaths. We received reports of people being injured through collisions, or falling over e-scooters that had been carelessly left in the middle of the footpath. We decided to conduct further survey research to get a more detailed understanding of how these new forms of e-mobility were impacting our community.

We received 121 responses from people who are blind or have low vision of all ages and from across Australia to the survey that we designed and made available for six weeks during September and October 2021.

Almost 40% of respondents said that they left their houses to walk on footpaths less often now that e-rideables are proliferating. One person said:

“They are far scarier now and cause anxiety. Have nearly been hit on the Southbank walkway in Brisbane with a fast moving scooter”

Another respondent said:

“It is not safe using footpaths as riders go very fast and have the attitude they have right of way when on the path”

Even when blind or low-vision pedestrians used footpaths, almost 90% said that they felt less safe because of e-rideables. That’s 90%, not 19% - nine out of ten people who are blind or have low vision now feel less safe when walking. This comment sums it up:

“I do not choose to go to Brisbane now as I feel I would not be safe in the city or visiting museums or the art gallery or just enjoying the environment, Southbank, riverside etc”

And what would you say to this person to encourage them to enjoy the pleasures of walking:

“It’s terrifying, some riders are so fast, they whiz past and I wobble. I have terrible anxiety that I may fall over”

62% of people responding to our survey said that they had been involved in an accident or near-miss with an e-scooter or other e-rideable. This comment is typical:

“E-scooter came around a corner and collided with me. I fell, my [Seeing Eye] dog yelped because I yanked the lead accidentally as I fell and the scooter rider just rode off. I was not badly injured, but nobody checked. I limped about 2 km home and felt very upset. Nothing police or council are prepared to do about it”

A theme of all the comments is that after a collision the e-rider did not stop to offer any assistance. Unfortunately we did not ask whether people needed to attend a doctor or hospital following an accident involving an e-rideable. I think we assumed that hospitals and medical practices would keep records of injuries caused to people with a disability. But as far as we know they don’t, and this is very disappointing because it makes it harder to quantify and analyse the impact of e-rideables on some of the most vulnerable people in our community, and it therefore makes it more likely that the neglect of people’s safety and wellbeing will continue.

63% of survey respondents said that they had tripped over an e-rideable left on the footpath. One person also said:

“They block footpaths and force my Seeing Eye Dog and I to go onto road to get around them which is more dangerous”

And a final comment:

“They seem to drop them where they like without consideration for pedestrians. I've trodden on more than a few”

53% of respondents said that the near-silent operation of e-rideables was the biggest factor in making them unsafe for blind or low-vision pedestrians, while 31% said that the speed of travel was the most significant safety issue. This is really good news, because what it’s saying is that it’s not the technology per se that is the problem; rather, it’s the way it’s implemented and the way it is used. In other words, it’s the people behind the technology – the designers, the regulators, the Councils, the users – who are causing people who are blind or have low vision to be and feel less safe and to have more accidents when they go outside to walk to work or to visit Southbank or get a pizza, or whatever. There’s no technological reason why we can’t make noise-making devices mandatory, limit the speed of e-rideables in pedestrian areas, enforce proper and safe parking, and plan for more options for e-rideables to use separate lanes from pedestrian footpaths. What is ultimately needed is a commitment to making new technologies safe for everyone, and our evolving communities safe for everyone to live in.

There has been a lot of discussion recently about the final report of the Disability Royal Commission – the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation of people with disability. The report comprises 2.5 million words and includes 222 recommendations, but running through it all, like the vaulted ceiling in a cathedral, is a simple, all-encompassing, majestic vision of the future:

“a future where people with disability live free from violence, abuse, neglect and

exploitation; human rights are protected; and individuals live with dignity, equality and respect, can take risks, and develop and fulfil their potential.”

We all have a stake in this vision and a role in making it a reality – whoever we are, whatever we do, and wherever we do it. I’ll conclude by inviting you to find individual and collective ways of realising this vision through the work and thought that this symposium leads to. We must ensure that e-mobility for some doesn’t bring about the immobility of others. E-Mobility must always be a technological gift that benefits us all and with which we can enjoy more liveable and inclusive communities.

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