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Government failure to ensure young driver safety costing lives and money

Political will to reduce crashes involving young drivers is lacking, say experts

Editorial: Crashes involving young drivers

A year after asking the UK government to take urgent action to reduce deaths and injuries associated with young drivers, there has been no progress, say public health experts, road safety groups and insurance industry representatives in **The BMJ** this week.

In the two years since the government's promise of a green paper on young drivers' safety, "it is estimated that we could have avoided almost 9,000 people being injured in road crashes involving young drivers, with 866 seriously or fatally injured and at a cost of £400m," they write.

One of the suggested reasons for delay is enthusiasm for motor insurance policies based on telematics or black box technology. This technology shows promise, say the authors, but it is unlikely to be the whole solution.

However, one intervention has repeatedly been shown to be effective - graduated licensing.

Graduated driver licensing adds an intermediate phase

between the learner and full licence, they explain. During this phase, exposure to high risk conditions is minimised by restricting late night driving, carrying similar aged passengers, and driving after having consumed alcohol.

They point out that New Zealand, Australia, the United States, and Canada have all implemented graduated driver licensing - and evidence suggests a 20-30% decrease in crashes, casualties, and fatalities among young drivers.

Furthermore, 68% of the British public support its introduction for newly qualified drivers. And in Northern Ireland, a bill for a “graduated driver licensing lite” scheme is progressing through the legislature and will hopefully be implemented in 2016.

The government has said it is “wrestling with how to make things safer, while not unduly restricting the freedom of our young people” but studies show that graduated driver licensing has only a minor effect on employment, say the authors.

A risk of increased unlicensed driving is also often cited as a concern. However, current insurance premiums for young drivers “are likely to provide the greatest incentive to drive unlicensed,” they suggest.

The introduction of graduated driver licensing “could be a catalyst for public transport improvements, especially in rural areas,” they add. Such a policy “could be a key element of a safer, healthier, and more sustainable future, not just for young people but for the entire population.”

Unsurprisingly, young people are less keen to see graduated driver licensing implemented . However, they authors point out that, even when people do not support graduated driver licensing they do not disobey it once it is implemented.

“With the next government will come, almost certainly, new transport ministers and the need to explain, once again, the

importance of action to reduce the risk of crashes involving young drivers,” they write. “We hope that come the 2020 election, no group will need to write to The BMJ to highlight the 30,000 deaths and injuries and £1.4bn cost that could have been avoided if graduated driver licensing had been introduced in the coming parliament.”

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