

Uneasy Rider

There is much to be done to keep two-wheelers upright

by Lawrence Herzog

MOTORCYCLES REPRESENT JUST one per cent of all registered vehicles in Saskatchewan and are driven only a portion of the year, yet they account for an increasing number and share of all road fatalities in the province. The number of rider deaths and injuries has risen dramatically: 2002 saw three deaths and 127 injuries; 2007, nine deaths and 195 injuries, according to crash statistics from Saskatchewan Government Insurance (SGI).

Over the six-year period, 27 motorcyclists were killed and 1,004 injured, giving motorcycles a fatality and injury rate significantly higher than automobiles. A spate of motorcycle crashes in Saskatoon in spring 2008 only provided further impetus that changes are needed, and they're coming, says Kwei Quaye, SGI's assistant vice-president of driver and traffic safety services.

"We've held consultations across the province in the last year, and we're looking at the feasibility of programs such as mandatory training and graduated licensing," says Quaye. Any changes will require amendments to the province's Traffic Safety Act regulations.

To help reduce the number of accidents, injuries and fatalities resulting from motorcycle riding, CAA supports Graduated Drivers License (GDL) programs and mandatory specialized training for new motorcycle drivers. Currently in Saskatchewan, riders are required to have a Class 6 driver's licence or an "M" endorsement on their Class 1 through 5 driver's licence to drive a motorcycle without restrictions. However, training is voluntary and riders can gain a restricted learning permit after passing a written and visual test. The permit doesn't expire, and there's no requirement to follow it up with an in-traffic road test to earn the formal "M" or Class 6 unrestricted licence.

Between 2002 and 2006, the number of motorcycles registered in Saskatchewan increased from 4,802 to 7,811. That means a lot of new riders on the road, and it's a concern for experts such as Barry Muir, who has been



teaching motorcycle safety with the Saskatchewan Safety Council for more than 30 years.

"I always tell riders to drive like they are invisible and to assume that everybody is going to cut them off," Muir says. "You must

always have a space cushion around you and an escape route, if something goes wrong. Riders cannot create space behind them, but they can create space in front, so increasing following distances creates a greater margin of safety."

SGI believes training is key to safe motorcycle riding, but Quaye notes that "to train, you need trainers, and the trainers need training schools. Our capacity is currently at only about 20 per cent of what we would need." Training centres are now being contemplated for Saskatoon, Regina and some smaller cities.

Experience from other jurisdictions, particularly in Europe, has shown that crashes can be reduced through a combination of graduated licensing and restricting engine capacity for novice motorcyclists. But regardless of what kinds of legislative measures are adopted in Saskatchewan, everybody seems to agree that changes are urgently needed. ▣

ride with care

- Perception and prediction are essential for safe riding; the best way to stay out of trouble is to see it coming.
- Wear light, bright colours, and avoid wearing black, leather or not.
- Position yourself to be seen, and stay out of other drivers' blind spots.
- Approach intersections slowly and position yourself to be the most visible as possible.
- Be cautious proceeding through standing water, and be on the alert for potholes.
- Most motorcycles have headlights that come on automatically, but if your bike does not, turn on the headlight when riding.

drive with care

- Keep a sharp eye out for motorcycles and appreciate their differences and vulnerabilities.
- Since motorcycles are more agile than cars, their actions are more difficult to predict and their size makes them hard to see.
- The most common cause of collisions between

vehicles and motorcycles is the vehicle turning left in front of the motorcycle. Remember that with one headlight instead of two, motorcycles are harder to see and it's harder to judge their speed. So during motorcycle season, check twice before turning or making a lane change – once for cars and trucks, and once for motorcycles and bikes.

- The same three-second following distance should be given to motorcycles as is given to other vehicles. Following too closely may be distracting to a motorcycle rider.

road rash season

- July and August are typically the worst months for motorcycle collisions, though May sees a spike as bikes are brought out of winter storage and motorists again adjust to their presence on the road. □

Sources: SGI, CAA

➔ For more safety tips, see the Saskatchewan Driver's Handbook and Motorcycle Driver's Handbook, available online at sgi.sk.ca/sgi_pub/instructional/index.htm or free of charge at any CAA Saskatchewan location.