

Rash of fatal motorcycle crashes worries police

Calls made for mandatory instruction as number of licensed riders skyrockets

Rob Shaw

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Police forces on Vancouver Island say they are troubled by a recent spike in the number of fatal motorcycle crashes. There have been at least 10 such crashes since January, compared to four all of last year. Six involved high speeds, including an 18-year-old man who gunned his Kawasaki sport bike up to 200 km/h on the Gold River Highway near Campbell River July 1 before hitting a rock wall.

"We're well on track to set a new record" for motorcycle fatalities, said Staff Sgt. Ted Smith, who heads the RCMP's Island traffic squad. "And we'll raise the bar to a point where it's just very, very troubling." The RCMP compiled statistics on nine fatal accidents. A tenth, in which a 40-year-old man died after driving off a road in Saanich on April 3 while speeding, was not included. Alcohol was a factor in two crashes in Bowser and Sooke. Two others occurred when vehicles made left turns in front of oncoming bikes in North Saanich and Nanaimo, prompting police to again warn drivers to be aware of motorcycles. Eight of the 10 crashes were deemed to be the riders' fault.

While young bikers driving too aggressively are part of the problem, there are also a large number of baby boomers dusting off the licences they acquired years ago without brushing up on their skills, said Const. Dave Hay, a motorcycle rider, instructor and a member of the RCMP South Island Traffic Services. "The newer riders are actually skilled," said Hay. "The older riders getting back into it are not aware of the skills. In the old days you just sent your money in and got your licence."

It's not just the young people riding "crotch rockets" in shorts and sandals that's the problem, said Tom Skirrow, president of the Vancouver Island chapter of the Association for Injured Motorcyclists, a non-profit group that helps injured bikers after a crash.

"What's happening is there's an awful lot of inexperienced riders getting overpowered motorcycles and the government is just handing out these crackerjack licences. "Part of the problem is 80 per cent of people out there on a motorcycle have never had instruction of any kind. There's more and more people taking safety courses for cars, but it's still a small number for motorcycles. It's really necessary. It should be compulsory."

There are more than 65,000 licensed motorcycle riders in B.C., up 16,000 from 2001, said ICBC spokeswoman Tamara McLean. While new drivers must go through a graduated licensing program, including classroom and road testing, there is no requirement for those with old licences to undergo refresher courses, she said. And ICBC has no immediate plans to restrict riders to specific motorcycles, McLean said.

Police and bikers both acknowledge it can be a tough sell to convince some people to slow down. They admit it's often the freedom and the adrenaline rush that attracts people to motorcycles in the first place. And some in the motorcycle community react angrily to news stories they perceive as painting all motorcycle riders as reckless, untrained yahoos on two wheels.

But Hay said those who see the fallout from the fatalities can't stay silent. "I've gone to the houses and done the next-of-kins in some of these people," said Hay. "And I tell you, it just rips your heart out. "The rider was a really nice person and they are gone and the family is left [with] this incredible hole for the rest of their lives. ... Sure, it wasn't a conscious decision to crash, but the bike doesn't accidentally hit up to 200 kilometres an hour."

rfshaw@tc.canwest.com

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Rash of motorcycle deaths sparks call for more training

By Rudy Haugeneder
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Mandatory motorcycle training is needed to reduce the number of motorcycle deaths on B.C. roads, says Vancouver Island Safety Council. The vast majority of motorcycle drivers have never had instruction, said Ray Hall, the council's chief motorcycle instructor on Vancouver Island. Some provinces and most European countries require accredited motorcycle training before licensing, said Sharon Hughes, a senior motorcycle instructor who doesn't understand why "training is not mandatory here." Both say the new driver graduated licensing program that includes limited classroom and road testing isn't enough to give motorcyclists the skills needed to safely drive today's high-powered bikes. Hall and Hughes would like to see ICBC offer an insurance cash discount for people who complete accredited motorcycle training. They point out that even veteran "Hogs" – people who have years of experience on Harley Davidson motorcycles – and "Rats" who ride Triumph motorcycles, recognize the importance of regularly upgrading motorcycle driving skills and flock to experience rider courses offered through the council. Several European countries require a new licence and several hours of additional road training every time a motorcyclist buys a motorcycle with more power, adds Hall.

Despite the plea for extra and accredited training and lower insurance rates, ICBC has no immediate plans to take such action, says corporation spokesperson Tamara McLean, adding they're also not planning to follow the European example of restricting drivers to specific motorcycles until more road training is obtained. Hall and Hughes said mandatory training that teaches motorcyclists proper riding and safety techniques are necessary because modern motorcycles of all styles and engines are so fast and powerful that people without adequate training can easily lose control of the machines. They made their recommendations following an appeal by Staff Sgt. Ted Smith, RCMP commander of Island District Traffic Services, for something to be done about the highway accident slaughter that has killed 10 bikers on the Island so far this year – eight of them deemed the rider's fault and mostly caused by motorcyclist inexperience, high speed and aggressive driving. "Speed, racing, aggressive driving, no helmets, alcohol or drugs and the incredible power-to-weight ratio of motorcycles are factors that define just how vulnerable a motorcycle rider really is," Smith said. "Do we really need to travel at 260-plus kilometres an hour," he asked. "Do we really want to wear inadequate safety gear?"

Motorcycle riders represent only five per cent of licensed vehicles on the Island but account for 30 per cent of all traffic fatalities, said Smith, whose goal is to achieve a 30 per cent decrease in the numbers of fatally or seriously injured road users (pedestrians, motorcyclists and cyclists). Smith said the facts show that "helmets, safety gear, sobriety, experience, defensive driving and abiding by posted speed limits are good habits that will help our motorcycling road users stay safe." But it's not just bikers who are to blame for the increasing number of accidents, says Smith. Automobile drivers have to take into account "that motorcycles are faster to accelerate, turn and stop ... and that they are much less visible," he said. "A fender bender to you is a certain death to these vulnerable road users."

To illustrate his point he outlined a handful of motorcycle fatalities in this region, starting with the July 7, accident on West Coast Road in Sooke, where a 26-year-old male riding a Yamaha was killed when he powered into a parked truck on his bike. The causes of the crash: extremely high speed, inexperience, alcohol and aggressive driving. A few days earlier, RCMP say high speed and inexperience resulted in an 18-year-old teenager on a Kawasaki dying near Campbell River when he couldn't negotiate a corner and crashed into a rock face. In another accident closer to the West Shore, a male, 45, riding a Harley Davidson, was killed on the Malahat Drive near Langford due to extremely high speed and aggressive driving, according to police reports. Last month, on June 3 in North Saanich, a 52-year-old male riding a Yamaha was killed when a motorist made a left turn in an intersection in front of him. Other RCMP examples included a 53-year-old male who died near Qualicum Beach after driving his Harley too fast and losing control.

Still more fatal accidents involving motorcycles included a male, 30, riding without a helmet on his 250cc Honda trail bike who collided with a car. RCMP say alcohol caused the crash. And lastly on the list of this year's motorcycle fatalities on Vancouver Island was a male, age 30, riding a Yamaha, who hit a power pole near Bowser and died due to speed and inexperience.

"Let's not break another record by killing more motorcyclists," Smith said.