

'Behind the Wheel'

Gophers - an emerging road safety issue

Kim Buttfield

Injury Prevention Coordinator

Great Southern Population Health Service

Background



- Dec 2005 GSRSCC concerned with growing interface between gophers and other transport users
- 'An accident waiting to happen'???
- Albany - seniors population
- Lack of data - classification as pedestrians
- How many gophers out there?



Gopher Discussion Paper



- To identify the issues around the use of gophers in Albany, Denmark and Katanning
- To prepare a discussion paper, with suggested recommendations for GSRSCC



Slide 4

Target Groups



- Users of gophers (seniors and disabled)
- Seniors health professionals and seniors support agencies
- Distributors of seniors products
- General road users

Project Actions



- Focus groups held in 2006
- Interviews with distributors
- Questionnaire to general road users
- Final report and recommendations by end 2006

Forum Findings - Positives

- Independence and non-reliance on others
- ++ health benefits - outdoors, combine with walking,
- Reduce social isolation - part of community
- Continued use of driving/road skills
- Cheap and easy to run

'Benefits far-outweighed the daily safety risks'

My new scooter



Slide 9

Forum Findings - Barriers

- Car culture
- Poor pedestrian design - entry/exit points
- Lack of footpaths
- Lack of maintenance of footpaths
- Interface with other road users - poor awareness
- Lack of formal assessment (health professionals)
- Poor design - lack of safety devices
- 'Bin Days'



Dual Use Paths in Albany



Slide 11

Bin Days



- Lack of access
- Poor vision at crossing points
- On major paths into shopping precincts/CBD area

“Don't go shopping on bin days”

Training/Support

- *'a quick whip around the car park'*
- Users Manual
- Lack of awareness of lead agency
- Second hand sales
- Katanning model - support from HACCC



General Road Users



- General lack of awareness of 'pedestrian' status
- 40% - believe they should travel on Left (cyclists)
- >40% believed they undertook test or were unsure
- >40% believed they should be registered or were unsure



Recommendations

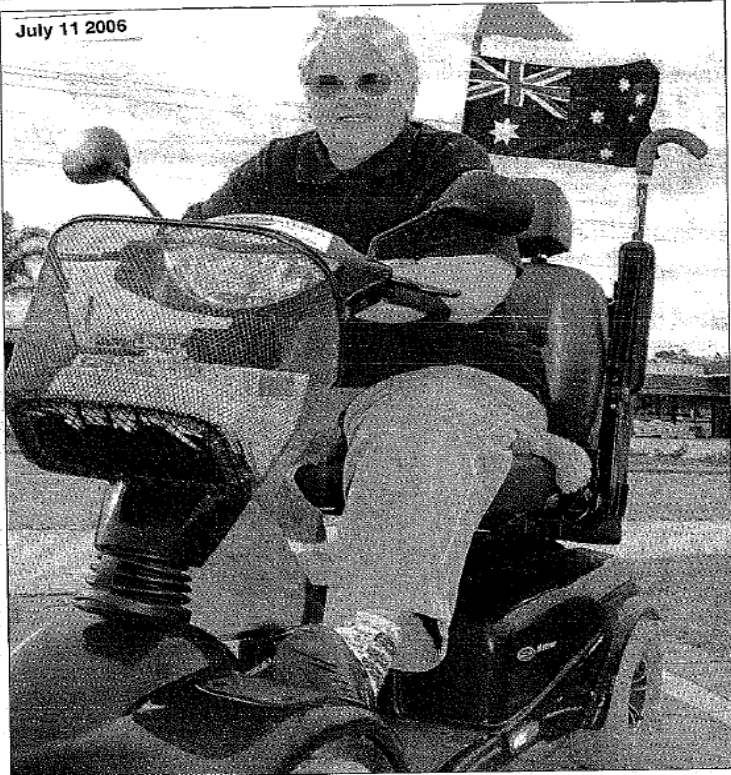
- **Education/Training** - regional gopher workshops, gopher get-togethers
- **Safe Environments** - recommendations sent to LGA's, slower speeds for CBDs, improve public transport options
- **Awareness Raising** - 'sharing the road' media campaigns. Link with other user groups (eg cyclists)
- **Safer Vehicles** - explore standard speed of 10km/h

What happened?



- Report to all LGA's in region
- Report to all key agencies/organisations
- Sought funding for ongoing training
- Distribution of info/resources
- Continued to advocate
- Slight increase in media in 2006/2007 (+ and -)
- GUG's (Gopher Users Group - Albany)

July 11 2006



Lynette Litfin hasn't let losing her car limit her independence – she is holding a meeting on July 26 where she hopes to start a gopher group in Albany.

Go for your life

AS the gopher revolution starts to gain momentum, an avid Albany rider is hoping to form a local group. Lynette Litfin purchased a gopher after her car was written off in an accident three years ago.

"I had been driving since I was 16 but that really shook me up," she said.

"I thought I'd rather buy something I can use in the future and with the cost of fuel going the way it is, this was the best option."

However, Ms Litfin adds it hasn't all been smooth sailing with her beloved gopher either.

"Albany City Council has got a lot that needs to be fixed," she said.

"We often experience a lack of courtesy from the community and I once had a truck play chicken with me which was pretty frightening."

With the formation of a group – and a unified voice – Ms Litfin said she could campaign for better education, enhanced gopher training and a greater sense of understanding from the community.

"Albany isn't friendly for gophers and wheelchair access – if you can get in, you usually can't get around," she said.

"We want to start a group for gopher riders in Albany so we can speak as a whole body rather than individual voices."

And with about 45 gopher riders in Albany, Ms Litfin said the need for upgrades to local footpaths and facilities has never been greater.

"So many older people, especially men, lose hope when they lose their driver's licence," she said.

• More page 2

Albany GUG



- Support Group
- Established end 2006
- Approx 35-45 gopher users
- Based on BUG's (cycle advocacy)
- Report maintenance issues

Hidden dangers of scooters

They are hailed as a simple form of transport — and a way for elderly people stay engaged in the community — but mobility scooters, also known as gophers, pose a considerable safety risk. New research suggests that unless caution is taken, thousands of seniors could be injured while using them. Chris Costa, of the Injury Control Unit WA, says the scooters can be used by anyone — often second-hand and require no registration or training. While they are helpful for people who could have no other way of moving around, they could be dangerous when used incorrectly, and even reduce mobility by reducing an older person's out of exercise.

"Quite often people will get them thinking 'this will be good for mum or dad' — in fact they are not that safe if people

don't know what they are doing," Ms Costa said. "They are actually not counted as vehicles but people do go on the roads with them and it can be very dangerous. Sometimes they are being driven on the roads by people who have never had a licence and don't know the road rules."

Ms Costa said the council knew of several incidents, including a case in Albany in which a person riding a scooter packed with shopping up a steep hill rolled backwards. Other cases included people modifying the scooters so they went faster than their recommended speed limit (70km/h in WA), or hitting pedestrians.

The Monash University Accident Research Centre has warned that a spate of Victorian fatalities and more than 150 serious injuries mean Australia faces a surge in scooter deaths as the products become more popular. The research

looked at accidents and deaths recorded through Victoria's injury surveillance unit. Between 2000-01 and 2004-05, six Victorians died from injuries related to mobility scooters and 151 were admitted to hospital. But the report warned the number of people presenting with scooter injuries at hospitals could be five times the reported number, since staff did not always record the type of vehicle involved in such accidents.

All deaths and half the hospitalisations were caused by falls. The other major causes included collisions with cars, prams, bushes, trees or fences, and tip-overs on uneven surfaces. Some problems resulted from driver illness or lack of skill but other risks were poor awareness of scooters by other path or road users, uneven roads and broken footpaths.

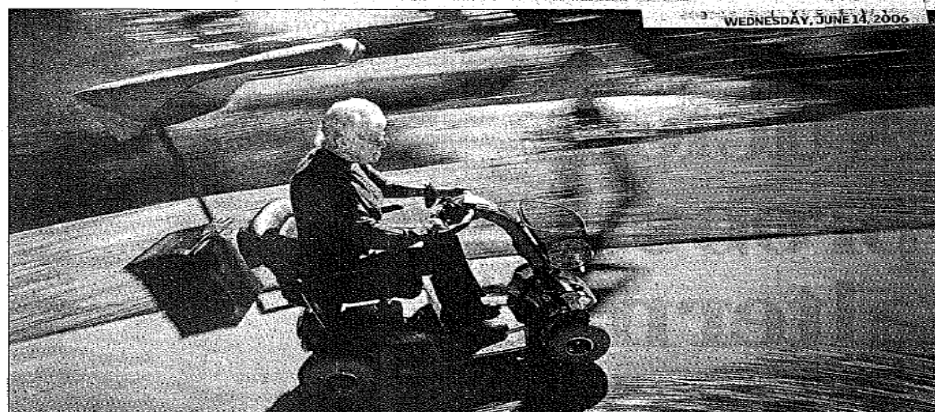
Ruth Callaghan



SCOOTING INTO DANGER

ACCIDENTS ON THE GO

- Driver of motorised scooter had been drinking and fell off, receiving cuts to the forehead.
- Driver was ejected when the accelerator was accidentally pushed.
- Driver fell off the scooter while trying to pick something off the footpath.
- Driver was shopping but collided with a pram and was knocked off her scooter.
- Driver was riding the scooter when hit by a shop's automatic doors, breaking two bones.
- Driver was on a footpath when hit by a car backing out of a driveway.
- Driver was attempting to raise the scooter's wheel out of a garden bed but accidentally reversed and was thrown into a wall.



Careful driver: Freda Jacob drives a gopher after instruction from WA's Independent Living Centre. Picture: Lee Griffith

Gophers a safety risk for grannies

RUTH CALLAGHAN

Granny gophers — the battery-powered scooters being snapped up by Australian seniors — are posing growing safety problems, with researchers finding rising numbers of deaths and hospital admissions among drivers.

Police warn that people who have lost their licences due to frailty or poor eyesight may be using gophers on roads without having to wear seatbelts or helmets, or use lights at night.

The gophers are counted as pedestrians under the law and there is nothing to stop them travelling on any road, except freeways.

But as pedestrians, when on the road they are technically required to



travel into the path of oncoming traffic. Main Roads statistics show three "motorised wheelchair" deaths in WA in the past five years, along with accidents serious enough to put 11

drivers in hospital and send eight more for medical treatment.

But injury groups say the number is much higher, as gophers are included in statistics only if the accident occurs on a road.

Injury Control Council chief executive Chris Costa said immediate action had to be taken to tackle the problem.

"The figures don't count accidents that occur on dual-use footpaths or in private properties," she said. "We need some legislation now that deals specifically with motorised wheelchairs and scooters and ways to make them safer."

A Victorian report found six deaths and at least 150 serious gopher-driver injuries since 2001.

Your Say

PO Box 1404,
JOONDALUP WA 6919
edit@thesenior.com.au

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

✦ Scooter laws make no sense

AFTER 28 years as a driving instructor I now find myself having to use a shop rider (owing to health problems) on our footpaths and roads — and I feel very unsafe.

I should be classed as a pedestrian, but many drivers don't think so.

At intersections I dice with death every day.

If we have no footpaths to ride on, by law we must ride on the right hand side of the road towards oncoming vehicles. By doing so we are putting ourselves in great danger, and I for one will not do so.

If I am on the left hand side of a 50km/h road and get hit from behind I would be pushed back into the seat and my vehicle would be propelled forward. Impact speed would be 40km/h.

If hit head on I would stop dead and be propelled over the handlebars. Impact speed would be 60km/h.

The chances of mounting

the kerb to get out of harm's way on the right hand side is almost impossible.

And if I am riding at night on the right hand side of the road with my lights on, would the driver coming towards me be experienced enough to know what to do? I would have a better chance of surviving riding on the left showing red lights on the rear.

I have spent \$6000 for my shop rider, the lights being part of the mode of travel.

Why this expense if it is not necessary?

J Garrett,
Mandurah.

Run out of petrol??



- Car-centric communities
- Lack of vision from some LGA's
- Consumer-driven demand
- Lack of funding support for training
- No 'lead agency'



Behind the Wheel



- ❖ Need for lead agency - Seniors, Vulnerable road users
- ❖ Quality data needed
- ❖ Broad education - all road users
- ❖ Structural/environmental changes
- ❖ \$\$ incentives to LGA's



Kim Buttfield
Injury Prevention Coordinator
Public Health Unit
Great Southern Population Health

9842 7504
kim.buttfield@health.wa.gov.au