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Correspondents are urged to write briefly so that readers may be offered as wide a selection of letters as possible. So many are being received that the omission of some is inevitable. Letters must be signed personally by all their authors.

New "Highway Code"

SIR,—The Department of Transport is to be congratulated on releasing at long last the latest edition of the *Highway Code*. This document needs to be widely read if we are to make further inroads into the unnecessarily high road traffic accident toll. Unfortunately the largely unchanged format is hardly designed to attract those people most in need of the advice, especially young male drivers and motorcyclists.

Even though Britain has a good record by international standards (except for child pedestrian accidents), accidents in general are still the main cause of mortality in the age group 1-35. Many more of the road traffic accidents could be prevented or could have their severity reduced by suitable road safety measures. My impression is that health education officers could more actively associate themselves with the police, road safety officers, and teachers in intensifying local efforts towards road safety. In addition general practitioners, clinical medical officers, school medical officers, school nurses, and health visitors in their day-to-day personal contacts could probably persuade more people to take road safety seriously. Those in contact with schools could encourage teachers to include more about road safety in their curriculum. Since the road is the most complicated environment that children can experience and traffic accidents are the most serious threat to a child's life and health in modern society¹ it is very reasonable that high priority should be given to this particular

aspect of education. Health visitors in particular could ensure that babies and young children are properly restrained while travelling in cars. General practitioners might possibly be able to influence the drug-taking and drinking habits of many more people in relation to driving.

We might possibly have more confidence in the new *Highway Code* contributing to a reduction of accidents (and this is surely one of its objectives—for example, para 28 on safety belts) if more attention was paid in it to those factors known to be significant in the aetiology of road traffic accidents. Two examples will suffice:

(1) *Alcohol*—With around 40% of car drivers involved in fatal road accidents having a level of alcohol above the legal limit it is amazing that there is only one passing sentence on drinking and driving (rule 30). Surely the vital importance of this topic merits one or two pages with at least some demonstration of how different levels of alcohol affect driving. The Health Education Council has produced an excellent pamphlet (No AL5) clearly showing the dangers. Why not say in the *Code* that 2½ pints of beer puts most people over the legal limit and increases their chances of having an accident by a factor of 4? With 5 pints of beer the risk is 25 times greater, while for a drunken teenage motorcyclist the risks are even greater still.

(2) *Motorcyclists*—There is no special section for motorcyclists and moped riders, yet this is the group currently experiencing the greatest rise in accidents. Only passing comment is made on the importance of safety helmets (rule 12). This is surely insufficient in view of the increasing evidence

that incorrectly worn or adjusted helmets or helmets that have been modified (for example, by painting) result in a greater severity of accidents. The whole question of motorcycle conspicuity gets but two mentions (rules 29 and 136 h), yet it is the failure of motorists to see motorcyclists that is the cause of many accidents. An item of this gravity merits whole-page treatment using vivid material like the posters prepared by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA). Some hints on how to ride a motorcycle properly would not go amiss, but for this we have to rely on the police² or RoSPA³ manuals, which are read by only a small select minority. It is still basically irresponsible of our modern society to allow inexperienced teenagers to leap on to lethal machines in order to ride off to a very high chance of death or serious injury, often without any form of training whatsoever. Similar arguments apply incidentally to other road users. The car driver would do far better to read one of the many good driving manuals⁴ rather than the *Highway Code* if the avoidance of serious injury is to be one of his main concerns.

One could go on—for example, on the proper use of safety belts. The new *Highway Code* was an excellent opportunity to improve road safety standards—an opportunity almost certainly lost. Let us sincerely hope that on the next occasion (which should be within a couple of years) the Department of Transport will take more seriously the sound advice repeatedly given to it by several authorities on road safety.

J G AVERY

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¹ Sandels, S, in *Children, the Environment and Accidents*, ed R H Jackson. Tunbridge Wells, Pitman Medical, 1977.

² Home Office, *Motor Cycle Roadcraft*. London, HMSO, 1974.

³ Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, *Good Riding*. Purley, ROSPA, 1975.

⁴ Home Office, *Roadcraft: The Police Driver's Manual*. London, HMSO, 1977.