Early driving experience and influence on risk perception in young rural people

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Young people, particularly males and those from a rural area, are over represented in road crashes; this occurs in vehicle dependent countries around the world, including Australia. The attitudes, experiences and behaviours of young drivers are some of the key factors which affect their potential to have an early on road driving experience that is crash free.

This paper considers the views of young people, some of whom were brought up on rural properties, and had significant, responsible roles in agricultural work, including task related driving from a very early age. This early responsibility and associated awareness of risk of injury in farm related tasks can affect risk perception and impact on later risk taking behaviours.

Ten focus groups were conducted with young people attending schools in four towns in rural New South Wales, Australia. These were recorded and analysed using qualitative methodology.

The results indicate that risk factors in driving, on and off road, are clearly identified and understood; the majority of young people in rural areas are not “high” risk takers or sensation seekers. They also indicate that, in rural NSW, early vehicle handling, before the age for obtaining a license for driving on roads, is customary practice within the community.

Attitudes towards speeding, however, reflect that it is tolerable behaviour, and almost inevitable, and often not considered to be risky. Drink driving is considered more risky, and less acceptable, at both the personal and community levels. Future intervention strategies to reduce crash rates in young rural drivers should aim to address the attitudes and actions associated with speeding on rural roads.

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1. Introduction

Many young people who live in a rural or semi rural environment start to drive cars, tractors and other vehicles at a very early age, often to help with tasks around a property. This off road early driving is common behaviour in rural New South Wales (NSW) Australia, and indeed in rural, agricultural areas throughout Australia and other developed countries (Franklin et al., 2001; Begg et al., 2009b). These are very different circumstances to those for most other young drivers embarking on the driving stage of their lives; more often/usually around the age of licensure specifically to obtain their license.

The involvement of young drivers in crashes, both injury resulting and fatal, is greatly over represented, not only in Australia (Senserrick and Haworth, 2004; Senserrick, 2007) but also worldwide (World Health Organisation, WHO, 2002). Young drivers are usually perceived as, and are, “novice” or inexperienced drivers. However, there is a sub group of young people with a long history (several years) of vehicle handling on rural properties prior to obtaining their license, who may have different attitudes to driving and risk taking compared with those who learn to drive for their driving license at licensing age or later. This rural sub group, characterised by early (pre license age) driving experience, has been identified in NSW (Chen et al., 2009).

Within New South Wales, there is a Graduated Licensing Scheme, which aims to give those inexperienced in on road driving a safe introduction to driving, and a transition from supervised to independent driving on road (RTA, 2011) (see Table 1). This is summarised in Table 1.

In order to be licensed for driving on roads in NSW, an L License must be obtained; the minimum age for this is 16 years. However, there are no legal restrictions for those younger than 16 years driving off road on private property. Those who drive, under licensing age, on private property are a distinct group from “unlicensed” on road drivers; this subset is not a focus of this study. A USA based study (Hanna et al., 2006) with this subset demonstrated that the majority of young unlicensed drivers involved in fatal crashes were of licensure age, were male, and accounted for approximately one in ten young driver fatal crashes.

There have been many different interventions and strategies adopted both in Australia and a range of countries aimed...