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Blind Spots In Road Safety: The Risks We Can't Afford To Ignore

Ahead of the government's new road safety strategy this autumn, the headlines have focused on compulsory eye tests for motorists over 70, medical tests for conditions like dementia, and stricter rules for drink-driving. Depending on the evidence, these may all be valid policy proposals.

We should not, however, overlook the hard truth that young drivers are involved in more catastrophic and fatal motor accidents than any other category of road user. Frighteningly, the risk of death is doubled for 15–19-year-old teenagers, and for males in this group the risk is trebled from the general population. Road safety charities such as Brake have long campaigned for the introduction of graduated driving licensing, proposing a 12-month learner period before sitting an initial test and a further test after a two-year novice period when restrictions apply such as a late-night driving curfew and restrictions on the size of engine they can drive. There are potential risks of course. If you make fully qualified driving more difficult and expensive, there may be an uptick in the number of unlicensed and uninsured young drivers. But the evidence from New Zealand, Australia and parts of the US suggests that such approach can reduce life-changing young driver injuries.

Then there is the vexed question of e-scooters and e-bikes. The long promised new regulatory regime on so-called Low-Speed Zero Emission Vehicles has yet to materialise after years of promises. Most of the issues around technical specifications, safety equipment and usage can be hammered out relatively quickly after years of debate. This would leave some of the thornier issues to work through around road tax, registration plates, mandatory insurance, mandatory helmet wearing and retrofitting of currently owned vehicles. With thousands of injuries and some deaths, there is an urgent need to get on with this. After all, the UK is the last major country in Europe to bring forward a regulatory framework for e-scooters and e-bikes. And if a financial incentive is needed to make some progress, the Motor Insurers Bureau argued to the Transport Committee that e-scooters add 3% or 4% to motor insurance premiums.

The early headlines attributed to the road safety strategy may be proven worthy policies to pursue, but we must hope that issues such as reducing young drivers' motor accidents and regulation of e-scooters/e-bikes are not overlooked, even if they present a more difficult challenge to address.

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