

ROOT CAUSE

By Russ Bethe
116109 WI-G Educator

Recently my district educator gave me a clipping out of his local newspaper. The title was "Motorcycle deaths increase where helmet laws repealed." The three-paragraph story was about Louisiana whose death rate went up 100% and Kentucky whose rate went up by 50%. I thought, "gee, that's a pretty glowing endorsement for helmets." But then I started thinking. That may have been a little too simple. I live in Wisconsin and the death rate here over the same time frame was up also. Louisiana in 1999 had 26 deaths and in the next 2 two years averaged 55 a year. Kentucky went from 24 to an average over the next two years of 38. Wisconsin had an average of 65, then 74 over the next two years, then the rate jumped to 82 in 2002. As of August 4th this year we already had 66 deaths. Projected, we may get into triple digits for 2003. Wisconsin has not changed its helmet law which only applies to people under 18 and those with learning permits. Maybe helmets, or the lack thereof, is not the problem.

I am a quality assurance manager for a company that makes truck parts. When I have a problem at work I need to follow a process that is based on getting to the root cause of the problem in order to prevent it from happening again. Helmets do not cause death or even prevent death in all cases. Don't get me wrong, I do wear a helmet all of the time when riding. But the cause of the problem was overlooked in this story. Looking at these three states, they are all pretty much the same size, but the riding season in Wisconsin is much shorter than that of the other two states. How come Wisconsin has almost twice the number of deaths of the other two states?

Helmets can help in the event of a crash but they do not create accidents. So helmets are not the root cause of the problem. Crashes are the root cause of the problem - or are they? My next stop was to the Wisconsin Department of Transportation. I looked at the 2001 Wisconsin Motorcycle Safety Fact Book. In this book I found 25 pages of facts, graphs, and charts. I learned a lot about accidents on Wisconsin roads. One chart showed that in 1971 there were about 60 thousand registered motorcycles and about 61 deaths. By 1980 cycle registration went up to about 165 thousand and the death rate went to about 100, which was down a little from the year before. This is

when Wisconsin made helmet wearing optional for about 95% of the motorcyclists riding. From 1981 to 1992, cycle registration stayed around 160 thousand but the death rate dropped to a low of 40 deaths. This did not make any sense when you look at death and helmets.

The thing that causes death is crashes. If we want to reduce the death rate we need to reduce crashes. So I started thinking again. I thought back to my days as a rock climber. Most people think of this as a very dangerous macho sport. But when done right it is safer than riding a motorcycle on our roads. Climbers spend hundreds of dollars on climbing gear. Everyone else in the world would call this gear safety gear. But climbers don't use the word safety, they just practice it. All of the gear they buy is not used to climb the rock in the true sense of the sport. Climbers only use their hands, feet and body style. All of the gear is only used to stop you from falling to your death when you make a mistake. Sounds like why we wear helmets, doesn't it? Most people would not try climbing without someone to teach them how to do it first. This sport is very technical; you cannot learn it by just going out and doing it. Education is a must to survive.

The next story I read was in the Wisconsin safety reporter. The story title was "Motorcycle fatalities up sharply." It told the story of how the death rate was climbing at an astounding rate. Wisconsin has not changed the helmet law since 1981. At the end of this story was a paragraph that finally got to the root cause. It said, "The most effective tool in protecting riders is education." It then went on to say that Wisconsin had trained 23 new instructors in 2002 and that over 6,000 riders had received instruction. It also stated that because of high demand, there is a waiting list at some sites. I know this is true because I have been waiting two years for an instructor's course and still am not enrolled in one.

In 2001 cycle registration went up over 200 thousand cycles in Wisconsin. There are over 364 thousand drivers' licenses with motorcycle endorsements. This means that only 1.6% of all motorcyclists in Wisconsin received instruction. Also in 2001, Wisconsin saw almost all Experienced Riders courses eliminated because of lack of funding by the state. It was deemed that the basic courses were the best way to spend the money.

If you think back to the last time the death rate was a three-digit number in this state, there really was no formal education for riders. You got the book from the state, you did your written test, and then you did your road test and you were a motorcycle rider. Driver's education is good but does not cover motorcycles very well. We would not let people fly planes, parachute from them, or even do most jobs without training. Why do we expect people to just get on an 800-pound motorcycle and just be able to do it?

There is some luck involved in not being in an accident but maybe there is some truth to the old saying, "The longer I do this the luckier I get." Or should it be, "The smarter I am, the safer I am?" So the root cause as I see it, WE NEED MOTORCYCLE EDUCATION TO BE SAFE.