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November 28, 2011

Dr. Bert Lauwers, Deputy Chief Coroner - Investigations  
Dr. Dan Cass, Regional Supervising Coroner - Toronto West Region  
Office of the Chief Coroner  
26 Grenville Street  
Toronto ON M7A 2G7  
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Dear Dr. Lauwers and Dr. Cass:

Re: Cyclist and Pedestrian Death Reviews for the Province of Ontario

I am writing to commend the Office of the Chief Coroner for conducting the reviews of common factors in cycling deaths during 2006-2010 and pedestrian deaths during 2010 across Ontario in order to prevent future deaths. Addressing the safety of pedestrians and cyclists and improving interactions between them and drivers is crucial to promoting active transportation in Toronto and Ontario. Increasing active transportation is central to public health issues such as physical activity rates, injury and chronic disease prevention and improved air quality.

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to offer comments and recommendations to the review panel. It is important this review builds on existing evidence and expertise as well as emerging factors involved in pedestrian and cycling deaths. The following are recommendations for consideration by the review panel.

Firstly, I recommend that the scope of these reports needs to go beyond reviewing deaths and that they also examine collisions. In Toronto, we know there are typically 1-2 fatalities annually, but there are 1,100 collisions with motor vehicles and cyclists alone. Looking at non-fatal collisions will give us a more complete picture to all of the underlying issues that contribute to fatalities. I also suggest that the pedestrian report mirror the cycling one and extend the review period to 2006-2010 and not just a one year period to ensure greater reliability and validity of the findings.

I propose that the panel review the previous Report on Cycling Fatalities in Toronto 1986-1998, prepared by Dr. W. J. Lucas, Regional Coroner for Toronto in 1998, and comment on the status and progress of those previous recommendations and also factors that helped facilitate or impede their implementation. I suggest that the City of Toronto Transportation Services division be involved in such a review as they have already completed comprehensive reviews of collisions with both pedestrians and cyclists and would be interested in sharing their findings and expertise.

It is important that the review cover all factors such as infrastructure design, education and policies that contribute to or can mitigate serious injury or death. It would also be helpful for this review to comment on improvements that can be made to collision reporting and data collection methodologies that will help improve the ongoing monitoring and provide up to date evidence that we can act upon.

Creating safer spaces for pedestrians and cyclists by improving active transportation infrastructure will help to reduce injuries and barriers to use. These range from connected routes and dedicated lanes and spaces, intersection design, road surfaces types and street conditions, signage, lighting and environmental factors. For success in Ontario, it is vital that we have comprehensive policies and programs, including funding, that support municipalities in creating safer cycling and walking infrastructure that are clear, accessible and easy to navigate for persons of all ages. It is also important to review the role of speed limits; they are being lowered in a number of jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom to save lives. There is mounting evidence that the risk of fatality increases with speed with a risk of 5% at 30 km/hour, 40% for 50 km/hour and 80% for speeds of 60 km/hour.

The behavioural factors of drivers, cyclists and pedestrians involved in deaths and serious injury require further examination. Speeding behaviours, disobeying traffic control signals, failing to yield the right-of-way, cycling on the sidewalk or the wrong side of the road, intoxication and the use of handheld devices are all behavioural factors that contribute to the risk of death. Most behavioural factors are illegal already, so it is imperative to look at the role of enforcement of existing laws to improve outcomes. It is important to examine and comment on educational opportunities for motorists, cyclists and pedestrians. While it is helpful to educate children in primary school settings it is also important to focus on driver education and adults as most collisions occur amongst adults. It is key that educational resources such as the Driver's Handbook be updated to reflect learning that will emerge from these reviews.

It is also vital that a legislative review occurs investigating the role of policy and regulatory mechanisms that shape active transportation and its safety, such as Official Plans, Provincial Policy Statements, the Highway Traffic Act, Motor Vehicle Safety Act, local and regional transportation plans, municipal bylaws and the Ontario Traffic Manual. A policy hierarchy is required that places our most vulnerable road users (i.e., pedestrians and cyclists) at the top in terms planning and design priorities for transportation infrastructure.

We encourage you to speak with experts from public health, community planning and urban design as well as pedestrian and cycling program staff within municipalities to draw on international best practices and knowledge that will lead to improvements. We also encourage you to link to existing provincial and federal initiatives currently underway such as the Ministry of Transportation's draft Cycling Policy and Bicycle Network study as well as proposed private members' bills on 1 metre passing law and paved shoulder policy and Bill C-344 related to truck guards.

At Toronto Public Health we are currently producing a report characterizing the health benefits and risks associated with walking, cycling, and transit in the city. This report will examine interventions that could equitably increase these benefits and decrease risks for all Torontonians and to quantify the health benefits achievable. We are open to sharing our current work with you and providing any support that is required to further the success of these important reviews.

We look forward to the recommendations in these reports and believe that creating public spaces and infrastructure are essential to encouraging safe walking and cycling and increasing the related health benefits.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. McKeown', written in a cursive style.

David McKeown, MDCM, MHSc, FRCPC  
Medical Officer of Health