

EDUCATION AND HEALTH STANDING COMMITTEE

**INQUIRY INTO THE ADEQUACY AND APPROPRIATENESS OF
PREVENTION AND TREATMENT SERVICES FOR ALCOHOL AND
ILLICIT DRUG PROBLEMS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT PERTH
TUESDAY, 11 MAY 2010**

SESSION TWO

Members

Dr J.M. Woollard (Chairman)
Ms L.L. Baker (Deputy Chairman)
Mr P.B. Watson
Mr I.C. Blayney
Mr P. Abetz

Hearing commenced at 10.52 am**BROWN, MR MATTHEW JUSTIN****Head of Member Advocacy, Royal Automobile Club of WA,
examined:**

The CHAIRMAN: On behalf of the Education and Health Standing Committee, I thank you for your interest and for your appearance before us today. The purpose of this hearing is to assist the committee in gathering evidence for its inquiry into the adequacy and appropriateness of prevention and treatment services for alcohol and illicit drug problems in Western Australia. You have been provided with a copy of the committee's specific terms of reference. At this stage, I would like to introduce myself, Janet Woollard; Mr Peter Abetz, MLA, whom you know personally; and Ms Lisa Baker, MLA. This committee is a committee of the Legislative Assembly and this hearing is a formal procedure of the Parliament and therefore commands the same respect given to procedures in the house. Even though the committee is not asking you to provide evidence on oath or affirmation, it is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. This is a public hearing, and Hansard will be making a transcript of the proceedings for the public record. If you refer to any document or documents during your evidence, it would assist Hansard if you could provide the full title for the record. I also point out that we have our principal research officer, Dr David Worth, and our research officer, Mr Tim Hughes, with us today. Before the questions, I ask whether you have completed the "Details of witness" form?

Mr Brown: Yes, Madam Chair.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you understand the notes at the bottom of the form about giving evidence to a parliamentary committee?

Mr Brown: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you receive and read the information for witnesses briefing sheet provided with the "Details of witness" form today?

Mr Brown: I did, yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have any questions in relation to being a witness at today's hearing?

Mr Brown: No.

The CHAIRMAN: Again, thank you. I know that some alterations were made about when you were coming to the committee, and thank you for being so accommodating in relation to your presentation.

Mr Brown: No problem; always a pleasure.

The CHAIRMAN: We might allow you to give a presentation to the committee, and we will then ask you some particular questions.

Mr Brown: Thank you, Madam Chair. I do not have a PowerPoint presentation; I did not know that we had those facilities.

Ms L.L. BAKER: Quick, throw him out!

Mr Brown: Death by PowerPoint! Can I start off by saying that the last time I sat before this committee was for the smoking in cars issue.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much for your support for that issue.

Mr Brown: Congratulations on getting it through. We would like to see the committee move in the road safety area. We seem to have trouble getting things through Parliament, but the committee had no trouble at all, so congratulations on that.

The RAC is the largest member organisation in the state; it has 720 000 members. They are all primarily road users. We do motoring and we have an insurance arm as well. Roughly every second licensed driver in Western Australia is an RAC member. We come to the table today mindful of the committee's terms of reference. The first term of reference tends to deal more broadly with the appropriateness of prevention and treatment services. We do not have any particular expertise in that area, although I would point out that one of our contributions to the community is our community education service. We have a team that goes around to something like 300 schools a year, 20 000 students, and we provide a lecture or presentation on road safety. A key part of that lecture is, in fact, the issue of alcohol and drugs and driving. We go through things like: What is a standard drink? What are the impacts on driving ability of alcohol and drugs? More importantly, what are the social consequences of road trauma caused by drink and drug driving? While I will not talk specifically to that reference, I thought I would just note that we do have an interest there. We also have a very longstanding position that we would like to see road safety as an issue included in the school curriculum. There is certainly an area there where the issue of drug and drink driving should be incorporated in that.

In relation to the second term of reference, where we perhaps play more of a role, the committee is looking at the social costs of alcohol and illicit drug problems in Western Australia. That is a very broad term of reference. Our specific expertise unquestionably relates to road safety—the issue of drink and drug driving as it relates to roads and road safety in Western Australia. In speaking today, I note that a lot of the detailed information on this would come from WA Police, the Department of Health and the Office of Road Safety. I am not sure whether they are appearing, but if there is information that I cannot provide, I am sure that they would be able to.

Drink driving remains a major problem in Western Australia. The police figures indicate that the five-year average to March of this year is that the main causal factor in 27 per cent of fatal or serious accidents is alcohol and/or drugs. We could cut our road trauma by one-quarter if we could do something effectively to stop people either drinking or taking drugs and getting behind the wheel of their car. This is a really big social issue. We have been successful, to an extent, in getting the message through to legislators and bureaucrats that there is a huge economic cost involved in road trauma. If we look over the past decade, an average of almost 200 people a year are killed on our roads.

[11.00 am]

Thousands more are injured. The Office of Road Safety will tell you that in excess of \$1.8 billion is the economic cost of that. We try to express it in an economic term because when you bowl up in front of Treasury to try to argue for money for road safety, they are interested in the dollars and cents. In a sense I think we have been perhaps a little too successful in that people will think about it in economic terms, but this really is a social issue. It is the social impact of road trauma that we need to focus on; it is the loss of life and the impact on the families and, in particular—I am not wanting to sound callous but sometimes it is even worse when people survive road trauma—the number of people who have their lives destroyed. We have seen one in the media only last week, a young man who was hit by a drink driver. He will suffer those consequences for the rest of his life. His family will suffer those consequences, as will his circle of friends and the people who used to work with. How we can put a dollar and cent figure onto that I do not know. That is why the RAC is so passionate about doing something about road safety. If we can do something in the area of alcohol and drugs and driving, that is where we have the potential to really cut the cost of road trauma.

I refer to the Office of Road Safety, in terms of drink driving and why it is such an issue. The figures will show that drink drivers involved in fatal crashes are three times more likely to have been speeding and not wearing a seatbelt. Alcohol and drugs affect your ability to make sensible decisions. Firstly, if you are stupid enough to drink and get behind the wheel of a car, it is a fair bet that you will not be thinking about seatbelts; it is a fair bet that you will not be thinking about speed limits. The age group most likely to be killed or seriously injured in a drink-driving crash is 25 to 39-year-old male drivers, followed by 17 to 24-year-old male drivers. I will talk through a couple of our survey figures in a moment, but one of the constants that come through is that it tends to be male drivers who are risk takers and it tends to be younger male drivers who are predominant in that. Again, the experts will tell you that young drivers make up 14 per cent of our driving population but are involved in 30 per cent of serious or fatal accidents. That is where we should be targeting both our education effort and our enforcement effort.

We do regular surveys of our membership base. We do them through both our internal resources and through an external polling group called Synovate. Synovate are also used by the Office of Road Safety, so if they are appearing, they will be able to give you some details as well. What comes through and what is of concern is that despite all the advertising and the police presence, one in 10 respondents will fess up to the fact that they have been drink driving in the past 12 months; that they have knowingly got behind the wheel when they know they should not have. That is 10 per cent. The number is slightly higher when we have done specific surveys through our free2go, which is a young driver membership base. It goes up to about 15 per cent. Of even greater concern in the young driver set is that one in four young people will say that they have got into a car as a passenger with a driver who they know is under the influence. Young people make mistakes. No matter what legislation we put in and no matter what education we put in, young people make mistakes regardless of their education or background or whatever. What we need to get through to them is that if they make this mistake, it could be the end of their life and if it is not the end of the life, it will definitely be the end of their life as they have previously known it. It is absolutely essential that government continues to put the financial effort behind public awareness campaigns. It is absolutely essential that they find better ways of educating young people before they even get their licence. Let us stop teaching young people how to get their licence; let us start teaching young people how to be responsible drivers. Also in those survey numbers, men were twice as likely as women to drink and drive, or at least confess to drinking and driving. The 18 to 34-year-old male group is most likely, and twice as likely as the 34 to 54-year-olds and four times more likely than the 55 plus, so it appears the older we get the more sensible we get and we do not make those bad judgements.

As a broader issue, we are incredibly supportive of WA Police. We think that they do a fantastic job. We do have some concern with drink-driving operations that they conduct. I assume that the police are appearing. Okay. Perhaps an issue you would like to take up with them is the issue of the number of random breath tests that are being done. There has been a significant drop in the number of tests being done out on our roads. At the same time there has been a significant increase in the percentage of drivers caught drink-driving. The police will say quite correctly, and we do not question them on it at all, that what they are doing, and it has been a transition over number of years, is that they are actually targeting those areas where they know they are going to catch drink drivers. So the number of tests has come down while their strike rate, if you like, is going up quite significantly. In broad numbers, and the police would be the ones to clarify this, we are expecting about a 20 per cent drop in the number of tests done but something like a 50 per cent increase in the strike rate of people being caught per 1 000 tests. So quite clearly the police are doing a good job in the sense that they have figured out where the market is, for want of a better term, which nights of the week it is, and that corresponds also with the periods of high danger in terms of road accidents—Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights. More than 50 per cent of fatal and serious accidents happen on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. We have got no problem with the police work; we support it. Our concern is in terms of does that mean that they are out on the road less often. We

are all for efficiency and greater effectiveness in targeting them, but there is nothing that gets a message through to motorists more than police on the road. If Mr Abetz is driving his kombi van down Ranford Road and he sees a police car in his rear-vision mirror, like any other motorist I can guarantee that the first thing he does is look at his speedo. If you are out on the road and you are regularly seeing police out doing breath testing, it is the deterrent effect. When it comes to that one occasion when you might have had a couple of drinks too many, you have got in the back of your mind that the police may be out there. It is not enough just to advertise that we know your back streets. You need a high profile presence out there. Full credit to the government, over the Christmas period the minister went out and invested additional money into putting booze buses out there, and they put them on the freeways. Whether they caught anyone or not is irrelevant. Everyone driving home that night thought, "Hell, I have never seen a booze bus on the freeway." That is planted in the back of their mind, so the next time there are a couple of drinks in the office after work they are thinking. If you come to the question, "Am I okay to drive", I say that if you have got to ask yourself the question "Am I okay to drive", then you are not. Having in the back of your mind that there could be a booze bus out there tips you in that right direction. The Office of Road Safety, again through Synovate, says that only 50 per cent of respondents could remember seeing a booze bus in the past six months. I have lived in Perth since the end of 2004 and I have seen one booze bus in my time. I got pulled over, too. For the record, I had not been drinking so I was fine. As I said, we applaud the police targeting high-risk areas, but it is also about raising the profile and putting in the mind of motorists that if you drink and drive, you will get caught. Sorry to go on about this.

[11.10 am]

In summary, I wish to say that one of the things that we will be looking for from the government to help at the drink-driver stage is the implementation of the repeat drink-driver strategy. We are very frustrated that this has moved so slowly. It was announced in February last year that it had ministerial council support. We are yet to see it.

The CHAIRMAN: The repeat drink-driver strategy?

Mr P. ABETZ: What is it?

Ms L.L. BAKER: You cannot keep getting your licence back.

Mr Brown: It does target that. Police figures reported in *The West Australian* earlier this year showed that of the roughly 20 000 drink-driving offenders in the previous financial year, one in three was a repeat offender, 4 400 had one previous charge, 1 700 had two previous charges, 660 had three previous charges, 260 had four previous charges, 103 had been charged five times and 47 had six existing charges. There is a hardcore problem out there of people who think they can just drink and drive and it does not matter to them. The repeat drink-driving strategy—it is on the government website—talks about alcohol ignition interlock schemes; vehicle sanctions, with provision to impound and confiscate vehicles; rehabilitation of repeat drink drivers; and compulsory blood alcohol analysis for all drivers involved in a fatal or serious injury crash. We do not know the full extent of our drink-driving problem because at the moment when someone is taken to hospital after a serious crash, there is no obligation for a blood alcohol test to be done.

Mr P. ABETZ: Is there no legal requirement? I assumed that had been in place for years. It is interesting.

Mr Brown: Part of the strategy is to take away the right of someone to refuse to have a blood alcohol test. We do not want to be silly about it. If a doctor is struggling to save somebody's life, we do not expect them to say, "Hang on a minute; I have to take a blood test for your BAC." We would like to get a clearer picture of the actual rate of alcohol influence in terms of road trauma.

The CHAIRMAN: In terms of repeat drink drivers and rehabilitation, which state would you say has best practice in that area at the moment? Is it something that is probably worth us looking at to see what other state is doing this well?

Mr Brown: The government has already looked at it. This strategy is there. Let us not reinvent it.

Mr P. ABETZ: Get on with it.

Mr Brown: Yes, we are saying we should get on with it. It is beyond the terms of reference for your inquiry but perhaps something you might want to put in the back of your mind is that the machinery of government when it comes to road safety does not work. If I can draw an analogy, the mining sector and the resources sector have trouble with their approvals process. We have had review after review at a government level to try to streamline that and get that machinery working. With road safety, we do not have a body or an inquiry that can sit down and say, "Why does it take us eight to 10 years to do this stuff when it is done interstate? Why is it that alcohol interlocks were first talked about back in 2002–03?" We do not have them yet.

Mr P. ABETZ: Does any state have them yet?

Mr Brown: Victoria and New South Wales have them. We talked about graduated demerit points for provisional drivers for three years but we do not have a date for it. We are the only state that has not announced a start-up date for child restraints under the new regulations. It is a standard regulation across Australia but it has not happened here. We started talking about graduated rider training for motorcycle riders in 2004. We are currently aiming to deliver it in 2012. It would be useful for the Parliament or a body such as this to sit down and figure out the barriers and work out how we can become more effective in the road safety area. I will get off my soapbox.

The CHAIRMAN: Are you saying that even with this repeat offender problem, a decision should be made? Is it legislation that we are lacking or dollars?

Mr Brown: Probably a bit of both. If you have the Office of Road Safety appearing before you, I suggest you ask Iain Cameron that question. I do not want to be misinterpreted. I am not having a go at the bureaucracy for the sake of having a go but it does get very frustrating. Everyone agrees with this. It seems to have bipartisan support but it is so incredibly slow.

On top of the repeat drink-driver strategy, we have said publicly that the current licence suspension periods for drink driving are a joke in Western Australia. We are completely out of step with every other state in Australia, except Queensland. We have called consistently for a doubling of the minimum suspension from three to six months, going right through the scale and doubling. We need to get the message through to drivers that if they get behind the wheel of a car and they have been drinking, they will lose their licence and it will impact on their lifestyle. Going on from that, we think there should be a review of the extraordinary driver's licence system. At the moment, you can lose your licence drink driving, appear in front of a magistrate, say that you do not understand public transport and get your licence back. Where is the deterrent effect? We are saying that there should be a mix of education, particularly for young people, that deterrent so that people understand that not only could they lose their licence but they could also lose their job and if they have a wife, a kid and a mortgage, how are they going to pay for that?

Ms L.L. BAKER: Is that a clear outcome of having a greater deterrent? Is there well-documented evidence-based research that shows that by increasing the penalties, it will deter people? I remember those figures you were quoting earlier about the number of repeat offenders.

Mr Brown: With the repeat offenders, there is a hardcore element there. Fate does not care whether you are a repeat offender when it comes to a road accident. It could be the one time of the year you stay behind at the office and have a couple of drinks too many and because you are affected by alcohol, you are more likely to be distracted. Your reflex time and your reaction time is down. That kid walks out in front of you and you hit them.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I understand that. Do you have some well-documented evidence about increasing the deterrent or the punishment? I am not arguing against it.

Mr Brown: The Road Safety Council had a paper put to it, which would have gone to the minister, which I think was done by Peter Metropolis, which goes through the evidence-based argument. In terms of doubling the penalties, I suppose it is like anything: when it first comes in, people say, “Wow, this could happen to me; I’ll change my behaviour.” There was a significant drop in alcohol-related road trauma when random breath testing was first introduced. It was high profile and people changed their behaviour. After a while, it phased out. We need to continually look at ways to send the message that we are serious about doing something about this problem and that people had better change their behaviour or there are consequences.

Mr P. ABETZ: It would seem to me that the hardcore, which are often overrepresented in accidents, are obviously people who have a major alcohol problem. It is not so much that they just happen to have a few drinks after work and this thing happens once a month. I know one person who has been an alcoholic for many years. He got up one morning and on the way to work had to blow into a breathalyser. He was still over the limit and lost his licence. It would seem to me that when people appear, say, the second time, there really needs to be an intervention system that identifies this person as obviously having an alcohol addiction issue that needs to be addressed. Unless they address it, they should not be able to get their licence back.

[11.20 am]

Mr Brown: Yes.

Mr P. ABETZ: To me it seems that to take it off them for three months is not solving the problem; it makes it safer on the road for three months but it does not actually address the core issue for that person.

Mr Brown: That is an excellent point that I was coming to. One of the shortcomings we see in the current system is that you lose your licence for three months, it is a little bit of an inconvenience for you, and you get it back after your three months. In Victoria if you lose your licence, you are required to go to a lecture about alcohol and its impact. There are some people here in Western Australia who shrug their shoulders and say, “Well, so what? You just show up; you don’t learn anything.” It is part of the process of showing the community that you are serious about it. If it is an inconvenience to them, if it is adding to that inconvenience factor, then that adds to the deterrent factor. We think that anyone who loses their licence should be required to do a lecture about alcohol and its impact and repeat offenders should be required to do counselling. It is up to the government and the Office of Road Safety to figure out what form that should take. Certainly, those who are multiple offenders should be required by the courts to undertake a rehabilitation course.

The CHAIRMAN: We do currently have on the table in Parliament legislation in relation to cannabis. One of the outcomes of that legislation is that if someone has up to 10 grams of cannabis on their person, then they will be given the option of attending a cannabis intervention session or going to court. If it is more than 10 grams, it is immediately a criminal conviction. The problems with cannabis could be that these people are driving, but with driving it is not just the harm to themselves but also the harm to other people, so you are suggesting a similar program for people with alcohol. In relation to the cannabis legislation, I have put an amendment on the table that it either be the intervention session or a community work order and that again really supports what you are saying; that people realise that this is a serious issue.

Mr Brown: Just going on from that, one of the real problems with repeat drink drivers is that they do not care that they have lost their licence because they just go out and drive anyway. I think it is appropriate that we acknowledge one of the really good things that the current government has done, and the current Minister for Road Safety should take a fair bit of credit for, is the impounding of vehicles of unlicensed drivers. That is an outstanding contribution to road safety. If you do not

have a licence, you should not be on the roads. If the only way to get the message through to you is to impound and then ultimately confiscate your vehicle, then that is the way it has to be. Nothing else seems to be getting through to that particularly hard core, so full credit to the minister and the government for getting that done.

The CHAIRMAN: We will let Matt finish off his presentation; otherwise, he will not get finish it because we have so many questions for him.

Mr Brown: I think we have covered a lot of this now. We think there should be zero blood alcohol content for supervisors of novice drivers primarily because we are trying to send a message to young drivers that drinking is not all right. Currently, you could finish your last beer, sit there and supervise your driver. We think it should be zero.

More broadly, we think that the road safety implications, particularly access to public transport and a reliable taxi service, should somehow be incorporated into liquor licensing approvals. We cannot keep setting up these booze halls, beer halls, whatever you want, and have them licensed until two or three o'clock in the morning or whenever and have all these people spill out onto the street and there is no public transport and an inadequate taxi service. As I said, these are primarily young people. Young people make mistakes, and young people when they have a skinful of alcohol, are even more likely to make mistakes. Those mistakes, as I said, either end their life or end their life as they know it.

As I mentioned earlier, there should be continued and increased government support for drink-driving public awareness campaigns. Synovate research will show that as soon as the campaign goes off the air, public awareness tends to dip. We need to constantly get the message out there that drink-driving is not acceptable and perhaps look at broadening it, as I said earlier, to young people who get into the car with drink-drivers.

I mentioned compulsory road safety education. One of the things, not only just for this part but more broadly in road safety, is that it would be great if someone could sort out the sharing of data between government agencies. We are not a government agency so we are not intimately involved with it, but there just seems to be a number of blockages along the way —

The CHAIRMAN: And the type of data you are —

Mr Brown: From the health department to the Department of Transport, from the Department of Transport to the police or whoever—it is very hard to get a grip on how big a problem is if you do not have an effective way of sharing the data. Perhaps that is an issue to question some of the public servants on.

The CHAIRMAN: We actually mentioned this in our report that we tabled last week in terms of setting up a research centre and trying to get that data from different agencies.

Mr Brown: There are issues, not specifically relating to drink-driving, with what is called the Curtin – Monash Accident Research Centre, which has just been set up with some funding from the Road Trauma Trust Fund, in that they cannot get access to data from the Department of Transport because of I think privacy concerns relating to the parking issue with Wilson's Parking—remember they gave that? So we are trying to establish a nationally recognised research centre and they cannot get the data. Everyone agrees that they should have it, but how do we do it? So thank you for allowing me to make those comments and I am happy to take any questions.

Mr P. ABETZ: A quick question I have is that you have not mentioned cannabis, unless I was not tuned in. I think I read a figure somewhere that in 27 per cent of fatal accidents, one of the drivers has significant levels of cannabis chemicals in their blood. Do you have any data in terms of what effect drugs are having on our road toll?

Mr Brown: The only data that I have access to comes from the WA Police and they might be able to break it down further, but the 27 per cent figure that I mentioned earlier is from the column called “alcohol and/or drugs”, so whether it is cannabis or amphetamines or whatever —

The CHAIRMAN: What about in relation to your own insurance data; does that provide statistics in relation to the proportion of motor accident claims where alcohol and other drugs were a contributing factor?

Mr Brown: In terms of alcohol, I spoke with our insurance people and it is a very small number.

The CHAIRMAN: Small number—is that a dollar value?

Mr P. ABETZ: People would not own up to it if they had!

Mr Brown: This is the problem: if you have an accident in your car, the RAC does not race out and breath test you. We are relying to an extent on your evidence. We do investigations—these are very rough figures so I would not base any policy on it—and of roughly 30 000 claims, 100 might be knocked back because of alcohol where we have been able to determine that someone has been drinking, or even from the accident itself determine that they were not in control of the car. If you are under the influence of alcohol or affected by alcohol, then you are putting your insurance cover at risk. But in terms of drugs, apart from making a general assessment of how the hell did someone manage to crash in this manner and thinking that they must have been affected by something, we have no way of knowing. It is more, unfortunately, the police when someone has in fact killed themselves whether they have the ability to then do a blood test and check.

[11.30 am]

The CHAIRMAN: From your knowledge in the area, do you believe that the impact of alcohol on the roads in WA has worsened, improved or stayed very much on a par for the past 10 years?

Mr Brown: As I said, the figures I have seen are a five-year average. Statistics can be misleading. If you look at the number of people being caught drink-driving, it is a graph that is trending up very strongly. It would be very easy to say that that means the problem is getting worse. It may not be because what it actually means is that the police are getting smarter about targeting those tests. In fact, as I said earlier, they are doing fewer tests but they are catching more people. I think it has been a constant problem. As I said, when alcohol is the main causal factor in more than one in four accidents, you cannot turn your back and say that it is not an issue. It is a significant —

The CHAIRMAN: Was it one in four five years ago?

Mr Brown: I would have to check that. As I have said, the figures I am working on are a five-year average.

The CHAIRMAN: If you are able to supply us with not only the answer to that question, but also where you gathered that data from, because it would be interesting for us to look back and see —

Mr Brown: We rely primarily on the police for the data. That is natural; they are the ones who do the test.

The CHAIRMAN: Helping to point us in that direction would be very useful in looking at where that data is. What about the RAC’s driver training? How does that target drink-driving?

Mr Brown: When you say the “RAC’s driver training”, in the middle of last year we took over what was then DTEC out at the airport; it is now called the RAC Driving Centre. It is a post-licence training centre; it is for people who already have their licence and are out on the roads and want to improve their driving skills. It is primarily a business to business operation, so Woodside, BHP and Australia Post, which have lots of people driving around, will send their people to us for training. Those places will already have zero alcohol in their operating procedures. The RAC, in its operating procedures for its fleet, has zero alcohol.

[ERROR: Mr Brown advised the Committee on 20 May 2010 that “The RAC’s current Alcohol and Drugs policy states: ‘Employees and contractors can not drive the organisation’s vehicles, operate plant or undertake any other high risk activity whilst affected by alcohol or any other drug.’”]

We have a number of services in terms of assisting the children of our members who are looking to get their licence. We have a system called keys2drive, which has been picked up by the federal government. We have a system called free2go, whereby we try to get —

The CHAIRMAN: Is free2drive youth-specific?

Mr Brown: Keys2drive is aimed at young drivers looking to get their driver’s licence. Again, there are strong anti-alcohol messages in that.

The CHAIRMAN: Is that available in metropolitan and regional areas?

Mr Brown: Yes. It is a program that we designed originally to try to help the driver training industry lift its standards. It has subsequently been taken up by the federal government and was launched here a couple of weeks ago by Minister Albanese. It is available to young drivers. It is primarily a web-based training system, but it also has quite an innovative concept whereby you get one free driving lesson and the parents sit in on the driving lesson. It is trying to teach the parents, who will be doing most of the supervising, how to teach their children, because most parents already have their own ingrained inadequacies and bad habits in their driving and we do not want them being passed on to their kids. We have keys2drive. Free2go is a product aimed at young members who are just starting to drive. Again, that has strong anti-alcohol messages. We have it on our website. We do community education, as I said earlier. There is SDERA, the School Drug Education and Road Aware program, which is a Department of Health program. We deliver some lectures on its behalf. Again, that is an area in which a great amount of really good quality material has been developed, funded by the taxpayer, but the problem is getting schools to take it up. Ultimately, as I said earlier, we would like to look at a system whereby it becomes part of the curriculum. The material is there; it is just not being widely used. Through all those sorts of youth programs, we certainly promote the responsible drinking message and the “Don’t drink and drive” message. I do a lot of media in relation to road safety and public forums et cetera. The simplest message we can give people is that if they have to ask themselves the question, “Am I okay to drive?” then they are not okay to drive, so they should not.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you think the government should consider revisiting the legal blood alcohol limits? Also, in relation to that, I think that WA is the only state that licences children at the age of 17 rather than 18. Could you give us your thoughts in relation to blood alcohol limits?

Mr Brown: This came up recently in Queensland. I think the Queensland minister was advocating either a .02 or a zero blood alcohol limit. The evidence that has been put before the Road Safety Council indicates that .05 is working. In terms of priorities, we would say that the deterrent factor for .08 and above should be the priority. The government has been talking about increasing penalties, but we have yet to see—I assume it has to go to cabinet; it has been through the Road Safety Council —

The CHAIRMAN: Increasing it from .05 to .08, rather than lowering it?

Mr Brown: No; the penalties for .08 and above.

The CHAIRMAN: I am sorry.

Mr Brown: As I said earlier, we would like to see a doubling of the penalties. At this stage I do not think there is the evidence to indicate that we should drop the level. We remain open if there is evidence that it would have an impact. I think our problem at the moment is that in 27 per cent of accidents, people have been affected by alcohol.

The CHAIRMAN: I believe they have lowered the blood alcohol level in some American states. The data from where they have lowered the blood alcohol level indicates that it has had a very positive effect in decreasing the number of accidents. You may wish to look at that.

Mr P. ABETZ: Is that from .08 to .05?

The CHAIRMAN: I am not sure. I think it may have been lowering it from .05 to .02, but I would have to check on that. I do remember reading something on that recently.

Mr Brown: We have always taken a position of promoting responsible drinking. I heard one of your earlier witnesses talk about the current culture of people going out and drinking until they drop. I think we need to be a little balanced in the sense that there is a large proportion of our population who go out and drink responsibly and who will have one or two drinks at a function and do the right thing. In my position, I am very conscious of the fact that if I got caught drink-driving, that would be the end of my job, pretty much! I have a pretty strict rule: I will drink one light beer if I am driving and that is it. Would that one light beer make me .02 or .03? I do not know. You need to strike a balance. There are people who will try to do the right thing and you need to be targeting those people who will not.

[11.40 am]

The CHAIRMAN: Most of the young people I know will actually nominate a driver when they go out to ensure their safety.

Mr Brown: Again, that is part of the education message. We have to be consistently repeating that message to get it through to them.

The CHAIRMAN: I refer to the government's repeat drink-driving strategy, which you basically said has been developed but has not been put into action yet. What strategies do you think will be most effective?

Mr Brown: When they talk about a road safety system they refer to a safe systems approach. When we see a problem we tend to say—whether it is a knee-jerk reaction or not—“Let's get tough on this problem; let's toughen up penalties and send out the message.” We agree to that in relation to drink driving, but, as I said earlier, it is more about education and public awareness. We must have that blend. When you ask, “What is the strategy?”, I think you need to take a more holistic approach. Supposedly that was the point of the drink-driving strategy. You do not simply whack up penalties, because that, perhaps, is not working. You look at how you actually stop the problem. Are there different ways of doing it? I mentioned earlier the impounding and confiscating of vehicles. If that is the only way to get a message through to a repeat drink driver, that should be done. Another thing is an alcohol ignition interlock scheme. It has been talked about for a while. Whether it would be effective—it certainly would be a costly deterrent for the standard first-time offender. In terms of some of the harder cases, the question would be —

The CHAIRMAN: How much are they?

Mr Brown: I would have to check that. I would not even hazard a guess. I will check for you. The question with the hard-core offender is that if you fit an alcohol ignition interlock to their car and they get juiced up on a Friday night, they will jump into the de facto's car and off they go. The saying is that we put locks on our house to keep honest people out. If a burglar wants to get in, he will get in. The drink driver who wants to drink and drive will find a way around it.

Part of the strategy is provision to impound and confiscate vehicles, rehabilitation and compulsory blood alcohol analysis for drivers involved in a fatal or serious injury crash. Coming in line with that is an increase in penalties.

The CHAIRMAN: Obviously you are a great advocate for the repeat drink-driving strategy, which we hope will be introduced sooner rather than later. Apart from that strategy, since that review are you now aware of any other initiatives that were not included as part of that review and put forward

in those recommendations that you believe would be worth the government investigating or doing more research into?

Mr Brown: Certainly to broaden the debate, as I mentioned earlier, on liquor licensing laws. It should not just focus on repeat drink drivers, but think about it logically. If you have a large number of people in a venue designed to sell them alcohol and they spill out onto the street afterwards and there no way for them to get home, they are more likely to get behind a wheel of a car. That is a debate that needs to be had and perhaps an inquiry like this could delve into it. That needs to be looked at.

I am not endorsing this from an RAC perspective, but there have been suggestions interstate—I think it has been implemented overseas—that drink drivers are forced to drive with a D-plate to designate that they have lost their licence and are back on a provisional plate and cannot drink for a set period of time and during that time they must drive with a D-plate. It is the name and shame-type thing. There are mixed views about name and shame. It is one of those thing that should be discussed and debated at a public level.

I have already mentioned the immediate impounding. At the moment we have impounding of vehicles for driving without a licence, but there is not a scheme for people who are caught DUI. If the government looks at the current scheme in terms of unlicensed driving and determines that there is evidence to show it is having an impact, then it is open to the government and the Parliament to consider whether it should be extended to a person who is pulled over by a booze bus; that is, they lose their car for seven days. The minister has also talked about, and I presume it is in the pipeline, an immediate suspension of licence. If a person blows over .08 he or she loses their licence for three months and it starts the minute they blow over .08. There are those people who will argue that that is not perhaps natural justice or proper justice, because they have not been found guilty by a court. Again, it sends the message that we are serious about cracking down on drink driving.

There is the broader issue of the profile of random breath testing. The Synovate research again shows that about 75 per cent of people perceive or expect that they will be breath tested on a weekend night. It drops to around 40 per cent for a weekday night. Again, if you are having a drink in your office on a Wednesday evening you might think, “Oh, well, I’m not likely to be caught on a week night; they’ll be out on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights.” It is a balance. Full credit to the police for targeting the high-profile and high-reward areas, but let us also think about the public image. If I have not driven past a booze bus in three years, I might take that chance. If I have driven past one in the past fortnight, I will not take that chance.

The CHAIRMAN: Are you aware of, and have you read, the recent report submitted to government about the reduction of red tape?

Mr Brown: No, I have not.

The CHAIRMAN: It looks at possibly removing some of the checks and balances in various areas, and this is one area. In your role you may wish to look at that report. Certainly, from what you have said today, you have encouraged the committee to look closely at the Liquor Control Act to see whether further checks and balances can be put into that act to try to stop some of the problems that occur on our roads.

Mr Brown: I am aware that some work has been done on that issue by the Department of Health. If the Department of Health officers are appearing before you, it might be worth teasing that out with them. They would be able to bowl up examples of hotels wanting to open at inappropriate times when there is neither a taxi service nor a bus service.

The CHAIRMAN: I thank you very much for your evidence before the committee today. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Any such corrections must be made and the transcript returned within 10 days from the date of the letter attached to the transcript. If the transcript is not returned within this period, it will be deemed to be

correct. New material cannot be added via these corrections, and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, please include a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence. Thank you once again.

Hearing concluded at 11.49 am