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Breakfast with Spencer Howson
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HOWSON: They offer a great deal of freedom, but are mobility scooters dangerous? Seventy-one people have died in motorised scooter accidents since 2000 and the Federal Government's now investigating their safety.

Craig Emerson is the Federal Minister for Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs and joins me now.

Minister good morning and welcome.

EMERSON: Thank you, thanks Spencer.

HOWSON: Seventy-one deaths in, what, nine, 10 years; how have these deaths on mobility scooters occurred?

EMERSON: Well they're figures from the coroner and all sorts of different ways I think, on roads, off roads. Obviously some of the people who use them aren't the fittest people on earth.

The whole reason for them, as you know Spencer, is to provide some mobility to those who otherwise wouldn't have it and I think that's a really important social function.

So I don't want to see anything severe happening in this space, but I think we do have an obligation to warn people of the dangers of using these scooters, particularly at dusk when they're not so easily seen. So a whole variety of different causes apparently.

HOWSON: Just before we get onto a little bit more detail about where they are allowed to operate, what people are allowed to do with them, I don't understand why this is under your portfolio and why you've referred it to the ACCC. Why is it not a Transport Department or Main Roads issue, for example?

EMERSON: Well it is Consumer Affairs because people do consume the services I guess of these and it's a Federal ACCC thing. The ACCC actually alerted me to it, Spencer and like you, I was really surprised with the number of people reportedly who have died since 2000, at 71.

Three in Queensland, so it's not doing, not going so badly in Queensland, 21 in Victoria; so I think we must be doing something right in Queensland in relation to

them. But you know, things like observing speed limits are really important and riding on footpaths where they can and if someone is going onto a road, do so at a pedestrian crossing.

HOWSON: Where are they legally allowed to travel? I know I was stuck behind one in Redcliffe about two weeks ago and this bloke is in the middle of the road, chuffing along. Well, I wasn't in any hurry either so it didn't really worry me, it amused me more than anything. But I thought he looked a little bit in danger where he was. What are the rules?

EMERSON: Well there's a speed limit of 10km per hour and that's probably why you were stuck behind the guy and they can go onto roads. But I'm not sure to be honest of the rules in relation to whether they must be on the road or must be on footpaths in each and every state.

They can certainly go onto roads but they can be used on footpaths. And in my own area of Logan City, they tend to be more used on footpaths.

HOWSON: This would - so I mean they can go on roads as you say, they can go up to 10km per hour so I guess this comes back to the question I asked before why you and the ACCC would investigate it?

Why is it not a Transport or Main Roads Department issue if we're talking about a vehicle that travels on a road? Maybe more than one department needs to sort of get together on this.

EMERSON: Well that could well be and you make a good point, that'd be a state transport issue. As you know, I'm the Federal Minister and we need to alert people to this issue all around Australia. And we're setting up a panel, Spencer, to provide some advice on the safe use of these vehicles. And that panel will obviously include the state authorities, so it will be a joint effort.

But the first step is, once this came to my attention, I felt obliged to alert the general public that there's an issue here. But I'm not interested in heavy-handed regulation.

What we want to do is just get the safety of these motorised scooters up because independence is so important to older people and mobility is fundamental to independence.

HOWSON: If you're denied a driver's licence can you still drive one of these mobility scooters?

EMERSON: Yeah I don't think they're licensed as such. I think you can just use them and this is one of the issues. Again, I'm not going to say on your program, therefore everyone should be licensed to ride them but...

HOWSON: [Interrupts] Are they the sort of issues the ACCC can look at?

EMERSON: Yeah absolutely and in collaboration with the state transport authorities.

HOWSON: Are there other safety improvements straight up that you can see need to be investigated specifically?

EMERSON: Well we want to make sure that all of the motorised scooters have proper lighting and reflectors. They're supposed to have a reflective safety flag that's high enough that motorists can see them. Obviously people should wear a helmet on these things and that's not always the case. So...

HOWSON: [Interrupts] Is that the law, that they have to wear a helmet?

EMERSON: The information with me at the moment doesn't say that it's the law. But again you can see that this is an area where some attention is needed.

Another area interestingly Spencer is you can imagine there are kerbs that people need to get up on, you know, with these motorised scooters. They can tip over. And as I said a little earlier I think driving at dusk would be especially dangerous.

Staying within speed limits; I don't know that there'd be too much hooning going on but at the same time, you know, the speed limit is good for their safety but for people like you in behind them, maybe people get very frustrated.

So it's an area that hasn't had much attention if any and it's time that we gave it that attention.

HOWSON: Okay Craig Emerson, Federal Minister for Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs and regularly heard of course on 612 ABC Brisbane with Madonna King.

Thank you.

EMERSON: Righto, thanks Spencer.

HOWSON: Well do you have a thought on this, what needs to be done? It sounds like there are a number of areas of responsibility here, what should be done to improve safety on motorised scooters?

Seventy-one deaths in the last nine years, only three of those in Queensland, as you heard the Minister say, but from what you know, what you've seen and experienced, what would you be suggesting to the ACCC as part of this investigation?

Ends.