



HON CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR SMALL BUSINESS, INDEPENDENT CONTRACTORS AND THE
SERVICE ECONOMY
MINISTER FOR COMPETITION POLICY AND CONSUMER AFFAIRS
MINISTER ASSISTING THE MINISTER FOR FINANCE ON DEREGULATION

Transcript
Radio 6PR Mornings Perth
Interviewer Simon Beaumont
10 August 2009

BEAUMONT: Well we see more and more, as our population ages, we see more and more gophers or these little motorised mobility scooters around the place. Of course they bring older Australians great independence, allows them to be mobile and get themselves around to the shops and go about their daily lives with great independence. They're cheap to run, they're pretty easy to drive from what people tell me. But sadly since 2000 we've seen a number of deaths through Australia and Craig Emerson the Federal Consumer Affairs Minister is concerned about that, he joins me now. Minister thank you for your time this morning.

EMERSON: Oh that's my pleasure, Simon.

BEAUMONT: What numbers are we looking at since 2000?

EMERSON: Seventy-one people, according to coroners, have lost their lives on mobility scooters or gophers as they seem to be known. And Western Australia, around 13. So I was quite startled when these numbers were drawn to my attention.

BEAUMONT: And of course, many more are injured. What do we put this down to, what can we do about it?

EMERSON: Well, by definition the people who use them are older. I am not interested in heavy-handed regulation because, you said, in your introduction Simon, they're really important to the mobility and therefore independence of older people. But certainly we can do more in terms of public education. Some basic precautions; for example, they're not regarded as vehicles for roads but people who use them are regarded as pedestrians. Yet, they often do end up on roads. They're pretty low down. Cars, particularly, probably four-wheel-drives, might find them hard to see. They're supposed to have a big flag, you know, that is a high flag sticking up. Things like wearing a helmet which, I am advised, is not actually required at this stage. That might be something that's worth thinking about. And really encouraging people to use the footpath rather than the roads, wherever possible.

BEAUMONT: So is this safety warning today Minister, directed at gopher drivers, or at others?

EMERSON: Oh look, gopher drivers really and making sure that these vehicles, if you like, are very visible. You know things like driving at dusk doesn't seem to be a really good idea, particularly if you are on a road or crossing a road. So I think that they are performing a really important service to older people and we're going to have more and more of those older people. But let's see if we can cut down on this accident rate and death rate. So we'll establish an expert panel with all the relevant federal and state authorities and relevant community organisations to come up with some recommendations to me. But I just don't want to apply really heavy-handed regulation because mobility is so important.

BEAUMONT: There's a couple of things here. One, we're already getting some comments through from our listeners. Sometimes gopher riders, drivers, have no choice but to go onto the road because some of the footpaths and cycle ways are poorly maintained.

EMERSON: Yeah, I think that's fair comment too. And not just in Western Australia but all around Australia. And, you know, we can't realistically have great footpaths in every part of Australia, obviously it would be desirable if we could have it in our built-up areas, but even then you're still going to need to cross roads and that needs to be done with safety. The vehicles, or the scooters, can tip up. You know, if they're - people are on them and they're mounting the curb or visa versa. So they're the sorts of things that we want to look at.

BEAUMONT: Just finally Minister, when you buy a gopher, do you need - or can you take a sort of - learn how to drive it, type of lessons. Are there lessons available for people or is this type of information readily available?

EMERSON: Yeah, I am not sure, and it's a good question and that's where we want to head with this expert panel, to see if they're - for example - should be comprehensive or, you know reasonably comprehensive driver education before the vehicle is sold. I think it's not a bad suggestion that you've just come up with. But you know there isn't a requirement for helmets, there isn't a requirement for harnesses, as I am advised. So these sorts of thing can also be pretty helpful.

BEAUMONT: Yeah okay. Craig Emerson thanks for your time today.

EMERSON: All right, thanks very much, Simon.

BEAUMONT: Good on you. Craig Emerson - the Federal Consumer Affairs Minister. Sadly, a couple of years ago we spoke to - well, one of my colleagues here had a relation who was knocked over on a gopher and sadly succumbed to her injuries and there's been around about 70 since July 2000 throughout Australia, and about 150 injuries. So we've had - and we've had 13 fatalities here in WA. Might like to give us a call on this morning. The - do you think gopher drivers should wear a helmet? They're only - the legal speed limit for these things is only 10 kms an hour and I don't know whether you have to take lessons or not, whether it's mandatory or whether you can just buy one of these things and away you go, you're a pedestrian. There are a heap of - there's a lot of advice here, slow down when you're near other people. Wear a helmet wherever possible, stay off the road. Be aware that taking medication or driving under the influence of alcohol may affect the users'

judgement, et cetera, et cetera. A number of recommendations coming out from the minister - the Consumer Affairs' Minister's office today.

Ends