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## FACILITATING ‘ACTIVE TRANSPORT’ FOR PERSONAL AND SOCIETAL BENEFITS

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### ABSTRACT

‘Active transport’ is a collective term describing the movement of people by foot, bicycle or public transport for access and enjoyment.

Recent research and practice has (re)focused on the movement of people in an urban setting, and in particular, on how planning and development can create urban spaces that are attractive for people to live and move around in. This practice also recognises the importance of designing physical places that are walkable, cycle-friendly, and ‘transit-oriented’.

This session of the conference on ‘walking and cycling’ emphasises that good design and attention to detail are key to creating supportive environments for healthy, active lifestyles.

In this paper I examine why ‘active transport’ has become so significant for the health and safety of the Australian community. By increasing physical activity through ‘active transport’, some of the health-damaging aspects of motorised transport (trauma, air and noise pollution, community severance) can be replaced by health-promoting transport.

To enable active transport, transport and land use planning must be integrated at a local level with great attention to detail. The consequences of this relatively new knowledge are to enquire how trip generators and councils are communicating and retrofitting the urban fabric to better support and encourage walking, cycling and the use of public transport. This process is just beginning in Australia and this conference

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is one way of exploring and sharing how councils and trip generators are making such efforts.

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## Introduction

‘Active transport’ is a collective term describing the movement of people by foot, bicycle or public transport for access and enjoyment. To the best of my knowledge, it was coined in the UK by the former Health Education Authority (Davis (1)).

‘Active transport’ associates the use of human energy with personal movement to get about. It contrasts the conventional assumption of using fossil fuel energy. It can also serve as a cheap and cheerful antonym to private car travel – an objective in both the practice of mobility management and Travel Demand Management (TDM) (Black et al (2)).

### Ecological sustainability and health – an overview

Transport is a key issue for sustainable development, and in particular, the health of people in Australian cities. Managing the mix of transport services for people and places is as essential to urban sustainability as managing urban water and sewerage.

Hazel’s 1999 paper on *Transport, Engineering and Sustainability* published in *Transport Engineering in Australia* provides a comprehensive yet very succinct account of this topic. Like other policy commentators, Hazel recognises that transport is a major “cross-cutting issue” essential to our societal wellbeing. He goes further to note that the operation of cities reliant on private car travel is “causing the strangulation of the benefits that brought [cities] about.” (Hazel (3)).

The Institution of Engineers Australia concluded in a recent report (IEA(4))that the increases in polluting and greenhouse gas emissions from transport in Australia are unsustainable. Despite the high economic costs of motor traffic congestion, building the way out by increasing the road capacity for motor traffic and/or allowing footway parking are in fundamental conflict with vibrant, sustainable city life.

Providing for motor vehicle use in cities requires large areas of land (estimated to be at least 30% of the land area of Sydney) and therefore expands the area needed for urban settlement. In addition, many facilities are not within walking or cycling distance or well connected to the public transport network once cities develop around private motor vehicles. Major roads can create community severance and restrict social and economic activity at the local level.

The conditions that create car reliance also foster the use of cars even for short, local trips. Sedentary trips have replaced trips that are within easy walking distance or

comfortable cycling distance (Mason (5)). This creates a downward spiral of reduced physical activity with adverse consequences for health.

### **What are the environment and health issues to be tackled?**

Conventionally, the effects of transport and health are presented in separate categories for which quantified data is collected, such as. "road deaths", air pollution, noise and community severance. The main response to this categorisation of the health and environmental issues of car use has been higher standards for vehicles and fuels and extensive programs in road safety. However, an OECD project on actions for environmentally sustainable transport (4) anticipates that contributions from technology will only meet a third of the change required, the main contribution will need be created using demand-side management.

Greater attention has been awarded to the wide-ranging health effects of air pollution from motor vehicle transports, particularly following the publication of a tri-country study (Künzli et al (6)) that established that premature deaths from motor vehicle-related air pollution are outstripping deaths from motor vehicle collisions, by approximately 2:1. In addition, the effects of fine particulate matter, emitted at a higher level from diesel-fuelled engines, are a growing cause for concern for public health. More recently, the complex issue of human-induced climate change due to greenhouse gas emissions from the transport sector has gained recognition as another significant externality.

The trend for the sedentariness of motorised transport in displacing 'active transport' has coincided with the realisation of the 'obesity epidemic' (NSW Health (7)).

An ecological perspective of human health (Chu & Simpson (8)) and transport eschews the domination of one or other health-damaging consequence, such as road safety, air pollution or greenhouse gas emissions. A different understanding emerges by taking a holistic view, one that is particularly relevant for creating or modifying conditions where people can live and get about sustainably. Such a view requires that transport and regional land management and control (or the environment) be treated in an integrated manner (Greenbaum (9)).

In public health, transport is now recognised as one of ten major social determinants of health in "developed" countries. WHO has also published a charter arising from a major London meeting between European ministers for transport, environment (including spatial planning) and health (WHO(10); Mason (11)). As the IEA report (4) highlights, sustainable transport requires a 'relational approach' since moving toward sustainability of the transport system is inter-dependent with the socio-economic system as a whole. It recognises that health, economic efficiency and environment concerns are already powerful reasons to act for greater sustainability.

In Australia there are some positive indications that the relationship between transport, environment and health is being taken seriously. For example, it is encouraging that in reviewing the NSW Government's 25-year air quality management plan (12) NSW Health identified the promotion of 'active transport' as an

important action (13), not only for improving health through increased activity but also by reduced pollution.

### **Active transport: the best buy for public health?**

The new approach and knowledge of physical activity and health recognises the importance of transport and land-use planning. The US Surgeon-General's 1996 report (14) on physical activity provided the compelling evidence of its preventive and protective health benefits; conversely, insufficient physical activity has been put on a par with tobacco consumption.

For Australians, physical inactivity ranks next to tobacco usage as the leading contributor to preventable illness, including the major diseases of diabetes, heart disease, colon cancer, and for anxiety and depression. The report *Getting Australians Active* (Baumann et al (15)) neatly summarises the considerable health benefits of physical activity. Only half the Australian population achieve the recommended level of physical activity – 30 minutes of moderate physical activity – brisk walking or cycling – on most days of the week.

One of the more effective ways of increasing the level of physical activity is through the greater use of 'active transport' rather than the promotion of recreation (Mason (5)).

It is worth noting that concerns about 'hypermobility', with the increased number of trips being made per household, are predicated on adverse impacts of driving a car both for the driver and the wider social costs. Similarly, "reducing the need to travel" in TDM needs reframing to make explicit that facilities need to become accessible by 'active transport'. For WHO, Barton and Tsourou (16) produced a book *Healthy Urban Planning* to emphasise how urban planning practice can incorporate health principles by mixed land uses and to help counteract the growth in transport-related health problems.

### **Convergence between 'active transport' and policies**

In 1997 Goodwin (17) foresaw the convergence of transport policies for health, economic efficiency and environment protection. Together, he reasoned, they could make a stronger case for demand management of private motor vehicle use. Further research on the conceptions of the transport problem for health would be useful here, particularly because "road safety" has evolved alongside the growth in motorization.

A comprehensive framework for working towards greater use of healthy, active transport is provided through the WHO framework for health promotion set out in the *WHO Ottawa Charter* which is now taught in NSW schools. The framework has the great merit of drawing upon relations between people and organisations and 'capacity building' (NSW Health (18)) – an approach that could usefully be applied to the most contentious aspect of transport: car parking. It is ideally suited to local government and planning for reducing car use at the local level whether to meet greenhouse gas reduction targets, social plan objectives or to support health improvement goals (such as reducing overweight and obesity) (for example, see National Heart Foundation's *Supporting Environments for Health* (19)).

In July 2003, the Local Government and Planning Ministers' Council endorsed the *National Charter of Integrated Land Use and Transport Planning* following endorsement by the Australian Transport Council earlier this year. The Joint Council's endorsement signals that local governments will expect to play a central role in land use and transport planning for local areas. The Council also agreed to a number of priorities including urban sustainability and community strengthening and to participate in a National Summit on the Future of Australian Cities and Towns to be held in March 2004 (ALGA (20)).

Integration at the local level is vital to enable local people to get about by active transport. For example, in New South Wales, co-ordination between plans and programs for land use and walking and cycling is sorely needed if the concerns of people, expressed through social assessments, are to be addressed. Perhaps the impetus for urban sustainability, at this national level, will precipitate greater understanding and action so that councils and practitioners take some transitional steps to re-allocate funds to better support active transport.

## **Discussion**

The journey towards inter-sectoral action for 'active transport' as part of urban sustainability is likely to be untidy, as we have learned from the anti-tobacco campaigns over the last thirty years. The opportunities for enlarging 'active transport' will continue to grow and advocates and practitioners whether prompted by interest in transport, health, environment protection or social equity, need to engage with both the changing policy context and organisations which are trip generators.

A response to the relatively new knowledge described in this paper, signalling the greater necessity for active transport - is to enquire how trip generators and Councils are communicating and retrofitting the urban fabric to better support and encourage 'active transport'?

The question 'where to next?' (for practice and research) will be explored in this session through discussion between the participants and the panel.

## **Acknowledgment**

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