Transport

New Zealand College of Public Health Medicine Policy Statement

Policy statement

The New Zealand College of Public Health Medicine (NZCPHM) recognises the links between transport and health:

- Active and sustainable modes of transport (such as walking and cycling) positively affect health;
- The current reliance on private vehicle transport has negative impacts on health through road traffic crashes, air and noise pollution, greenhouse gas emissions and increased sedentary time.

The NZCPHM calls for the development of a sustainable transport environment where active travel and public transport are prioritised and represent realistic and safe alternatives to travelling by car.

The NZCPHM supports transport users' hierarchy approaches for strategic planning, prioritisation of funding and implementation of all transport and urban design projects. The NZCPHM also supports the Public Health Association of New Zealand's 2004 position statement on transport and health[1].

Background

Active transport

Active transport is physical activity undertaken as a means of transport. It includes travel by foot, bicycle and other non-motorised vehicles. There are strong links between such 'incidental exercise' and improved health. Even modest daily physical activity improves physical health and mental wellbeing[2]. Active transport can also help improve mental health, community life, social wellbeing and community safety[3].

Most journeys of less than 2km can be completed by most people using their legs. However, the current transport infrastructure primarily focuses on private vehicle transport and this has been associated with a decrease in active transport.

Public transport

Although active transport brings greatest overall benefits to health, the use of public transport rather than private transport still brings additional health benefits. Using public transport often incorporates active transport as a part of the journey and therefore encourages physical activity[4]. In addition, at average occupancy, public transport produces less harmful emissions compared with car use and so is the preferred mode of long distance travel[5].

Public transport can often meet the needs of people where active transport may be less feasible – for example people who are aged, have physical disability, those with young dependents, and those

needing to travel long distances. Improved mobility for women, children, the elderly, and low income groups enhances health equity[6].

Transport infrastructure and health

Health is adversely impacted when urban spaces and transport infrastructure give priority to private motor vehicles over other modes of transport. This occurs through several mechanisms[6-12]:

- physical inactivity contributing to cardiovascular disease, diabetes and obesity
- air pollution causing respiratory and other illnesses
- road traffic incidents causing death and injury
- vehicular carbon emissions contributing to global climate change (with health impacts), where road transportation causes one sixth of New Zealand's total gross greenhouse gas emissions[i]
- poor urban design with limited recreational space and high geographic isolation resulting in disrupted psychological, social and community health.

The adverse health impacts from transport have been comprehensively researched and alerted to by a number of institutions, including the World Health Organization[6] and the British Medical Association[7].

Developing a sustainable transport environment

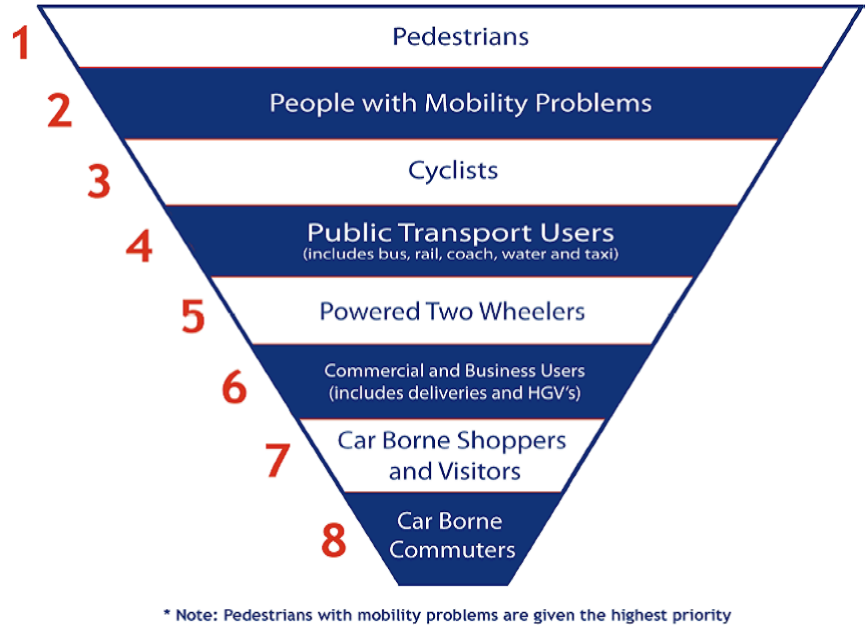
Good urban design facilitates active and public transport by making these options safe, practical and accessible; conversely poor design makes these options unviable. For example, dispersed residential development results in long distances to the workplace, which makes cycling or walking to work impractical[13]. The low population density from such 'urban sprawl' also makes effective public transport options economically non-viable.

Urban planning must establish viable transport options that are accessible and suitable for everyone, and ensure that streets are accessible by all people irrespective of age or ability. Investment in public and active transport is an investment in population health, and reduces road congestion for when people do need to use a private vehicle. This becomes a virtuous cycle so that investment in these low emissions modes benefits all transport modes.

The NZCPHM supports transport user hierarchy approaches for the development and funding of better transport and urban systems. Transport users' hierarchies prioritise active transport first, then public transport, followed by business and freight, and finally the use of private vehicles for personal transport. A typical transport hierarchy is shown in Figure 1[14].

[i] *This NZCPHM policy on transport concentrates on modes that most directly improve public health – active and public transport modes and road safety. The College acknowledges the roles of other modes of transport, such as rail and coastal shipping (as lower emissions alternatives to road transport), air travel (a large cause of greenhouse gas emissions), vehicular emissions standards and fuel efficiency, and financing.*

Figure 1: Transport User's Hierarchy (City of York)



Private transport needs to be shaped by the three Rs of travel demand management – **R**emoving unnecessary trips, **R**educing trip lengths and **R**eplacing car trips. For people to reduce their car use, alternative modes of transport are needed that are convenient, reliable and attractive. Reducing traffic volumes and vehicle speed in local shopping and residential streets is needed to attract more walking and cycling[15]. That most families are comfortable with having their children cycle or walk to school could be an indicator of safe and attractive active transport provision.

Links with other NZCPHM policies

Climate change
Sustainability (forthcoming)
Health equity

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