



# Bicycle helmet laws 'not needed'

SYDNEY

Almost 20 years after Australia became the first country to make it illegal to ride a bike without a helmet, two Sydney University researchers say the law does not work and the nation would be better off without it.

Chris Rissel and a colleague, from the university's school of public health, said their research showed that although there had been a fall in the number of head injuries since the law was introduced in 1991, helmets were not the main reason.

General improvement in road safety from random breath testing and other measures were probably the cause, Dr Rissel said.

"I believe we'd be better off without it," he said of the law. "I'd recommend a trial repeal in one city for

two years to allow researchers to make observations and see if there's an increase in head injuries, and on the basis of that you could come to some informed policy decision."

He said that although helmets protect heads, they also discourage casual cycling, where people use a bike to get milk or visit a friend.

Scrapping compulsory helmet use, he believes, would reverse that, improve health rates and reduce injury rates because getting more cyclists on the roads would make motorists better at avoiding them.

To reach their conclusions, Dr Rissel analysed the ratio of head injuries to arm injuries among cyclists admitted to hospital between 1988 and 2008.

He assumed the ratio would not change unless helmet use reduced head injury rates compared with arm injury rates.

Their findings showed that most of the fall in head injury rates occurred before the laws came into force.

After the new laws, they found "a continued but declining reduction in the ratio of head injuries to arm injuries (and) . . . it is likely that factors other than the mandatory helmet legislation reduced head injuries".

Dr Rissel said for many cyclists, particularly children and those riding longer distances, helmets were good.

Bicycle NSW chief executive Omar Khalifa was not persuaded by the research.

"The data in the study is neither complete nor compelling . . . we don't think it would stand up to scrutiny," Mr Khalifa said.

He believed the study failed to include cyclists who did not go to hospital because helmets saved them from a head injury. "We believe riders who have ridden and fallen would almost all support the fact the helmet may have saved them from more serious injuries," he said.