

Letter to the Editors

The need for independent safety investigation and regulation of road infrastructure

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To Editors of Journal of Road Safety,

Morgan's article (Morgan, 2022) raises an important topic and makes valuable points. In complex systems, crashes result from a combination of factors. Often, not all are recognised, a phenomenon known as What-You-Look-For-Is-What-You-Find (Lundberg et al., 2009).

While driving over 40,000km around Australia, nonsensical or dangerous signage has been observed. For example, a 100km/h speed sign was posted when leaving a town, and that road terminated less than 100m later at a T-junction with a highway. Another example is the use of roadwork signs with no road workers, no pavement narrowing, or no roadworks at all. As Morgan (2022) indicates, poor signage contributes to crashes.

When an instance of poor roadworks signage was explained to a State Road Authority (SRA), they replied it was a contractor's responsibility. The contractor blamed the traffic management company, who said they were following the plan approved by the SRA. The SRA was approached again that they were responsible according to the legislation even if they tried to 'delegate' the responsibility, but never returned a response.

Western Australia's Regional Roadworks Signage Review (Department of Transport, 2021) concluded with seven themes, 13 associated recommendations and complementary actions that would substantially improve roadworks signage. Two of the themes are Accountability, and Compliance and Enforcement, including "Establish clearer lines of traffic management accountability, and chain of responsibility on roadworks sites in Western Australia" (Department of Transport, 2021, p8).

Morgan raises two major ongoing problems; 1) standards must be fit for purpose and applied intelligently, and 2) sign authorities must be accountable (Morgan, 2022). Aviation, rail, hazardous industries and other utilities all have strong safety regulation. Recent inquiries into gambling, aged care and banking demonstrate that self-regulation or light-

handed regulation often does not work. Roads are the only major public utility without an independent safety regulator (and investigator). Regulation may be inefficient when it imposes additional costs to society and business and may not always be effective to achieve the intended outcomes. However, there appears little alternative but to implement regulation for road signage when practice has been poor for many years.

It is time we had an intelligent and informed discussion about independent safety investigation and regulation of road infrastructure, including signage. If roads were privately owned, it would have been done years ago.

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