

## IN PRAISE OF THE BICYCLE

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It is now little over a year since I last extolled the virtues of the bicycle, and deplored the short-sightedness of city planners for failing to facilitate the return of this once popular form of transport. Things have changed little in the interim, but it is encouraging to see the cyclist fighting a lone battle. The apparent inability of the city planners, the Minister for Transport, the Minister of the Environment and the Minister for Health to see that they have an inexpensive means of solving a problem common to each of their departments is distressing. If the cyclist was given a fair chance on the roads, the traffic congestion that is paralysing and polluting our cities would be alleviated, public transport would be permitted to move more freely and the ambitions of our immediate past Minister for Health and now leader of the country would be realised in that the nation could exercise as it once did in the daily business of existence without having to devote time to running aimlessly about the streets, or pedaling immobile ergometers.

Dr. Ronald Williams wrote a superb paper on the bicycle as a form of city transport in the *British Medical Journal* in 1975, and he has updated his thoughts on this subject in a comprehensive paper entitled "De Sanitate Urbanorum". In this he discusses in some detail "that most civilised phenomenon, a man (or girl) on a bicycle: the most efficient movers, so far as is known, in the solar system". A man with two pedals and wheels beneath him uses less energy to cover a given distance than even the sublime salmon or dolphin, not to mention birds, the great cats, the motorcar or any form of jet or rocket engine. For sheer engineering ingenuity, the synovial joint is an example of such complexity and elegance that no technological system can even attempt to emulate it. Then, compare the cyclist's ability to utilise oxygen in his working muscles at 36°C in complete silence with a rise in local temperature of only a few degrees at most to the cumbersome combustion system of the motorcar with its elaborate cooling mechanism and there is difficulty in keeping God out of one's thoughts.

In terms of the benefit of cycling to health, Dr. Williams, I am glad to say, lays to rest the criticism of those who regard cycling as unbeneficial and advocate instead jogging. "To move at 12 mph (19.3 km/h)—a speed which would keep him about level with the winner of an Olympic marathon—a cyclist on a lightweight touring machine has to exert only 0.1 hp (74.6 W), and at this power output an unathletic individual is probably using about one-quarter of his maximum breathing capacity. Yet the training effect of cycling only four miles each way to work at this modest speed has been estimated—on the basis of comparative caloric requirements—to equal that from 10 minutes' wrestling, over half-an-hour's squash, 50 minutes' tennis (singles), an hour's skating, a brisk 2½-mile walk, or 24 holes of golf."

There are, of course, dangers in cycling especially in cities, and children and the elderly are particularly prone to accidents. It has been estimated that cycling is about ten times as dangerous as driving. Much of the danger is due to the sheer carelessness and bloody-mindedness of drivers, who must come to see the cyclist for what he is—a frail and vulnerable body balanced precariously on two rotating wheels. Transport authorities must endeavour to protect the cyclist by providing cycle lanes in the cities. The cyclist in turn, and especially children, must take every precaution to avoid accidents, and it is encouraging to note that cycling casualties in Britain have been declining since 1959, although the number of bicycles is on the increase. We need something similar to the National Cycling Proficiency Scheme started at the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents in 1958 which to date has trained and tested over a quarter of a million of school children in Britain. There is then the much-quoted hazard of the damage the urban cyclist does himself by breathing in noxious fumes. Dr. Williams has, once again, put the record straight on this by showing that the carbon monoxide and lead levels in the urban cyclist are no higher than that found in the average citizen.

Let us leave aside urban cycling for a

moment to say a few words on the joys to be derived from cycling in the country. There are few greater pleasures than setting off early on a sunny morning with panier bags containing a picnic lunch, a flask of soup, swimming togs and a book of verse, and don't forget the repair outfit. Here is absolute freedom. No one knows where you are going—you don't even know yourself. Nor does anyone know when you will return—that depends on many things. Out through Carrickmines and Kiltiernan into the sleepy village of Enniskerry, past Powerscourt and on up the long hill between the Djouce mountain and the great Sugar Loaf with the sea shimmering in the distance, down into Roundwood and on past the reservoir to Annamoe, and lunch on the shores of the upper lake in Glendalough. The smells, the freedom and the peace. These I knew in youth and took for granted, but now nature's great gifts are within reach again. Wordsworth read under a pine tree, and the so-called priorities of existence are brought into vivid perspective. The return run through Garryduff to Glenealy. In autumn, the blackberries are everywhere. With the taste, the smell and purple staining of fingers, childhood memories come flowing back. Proust, that most sensitive of souls, was so right in insisting that the evocatory experience was unique, exquisite and something to cherish. Then into Rathnew, and quickly off the main road along the most peaceful of routes through Newcastle and into Kilcoole for a pint of shandy. The hill from Delgany to Greystones calls for determination but, with ten gears, the modern cyclist can manage almost any incline. Bray, Killiney, and in the forty-foot hole under Buck Mulligan's tower nature's salty waters soothe tired limbs.

All this pleasure I have achieved without disturbing anyone, at no financial cost, without polluting the environment and at an energy expenditure equivalent to over 1,400 miles to the gallon!

## Reference

1. Williams R. (1979). *Brit. med. J.*, 2, 1617.