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**Safe System – Comparisons of this Approach in Australia**

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**Abstract:** The concept of the safe system approach evolves from the *Vision Zero* and *Sustainable Safety* concepts that were introduced in the mid-1990s. In preparation for a truly *safe system* strategy for road safety in Australia, it is instructive to learn from the achievements and shortcomings of this type of approach. This paper examines the experience of *Safe System* approaches in Victoria, Western Australia and New South Wales thusfar. Each of these cases has interpreted the *Safe System* approach differently. The question is, do these differences in approach affect safety outcomes? In addition, do these cases provide evidence of the effectiveness of the *Safe System* approach? While *Safe System* principles have underpinned some road safety projects in Western Australia, Victoria and New South Wales it is difficult to definitively attribute overall road safety gains in these jurisdictions to the adoption of this principle. The primary levers of the *Safe System* approach are forgiving roads/roadsides, crashworthy vehicles and speed management to levels needed for sustaining human health. These aspects bring significant engineering and political challenges.

**Keywords:** Safe system, road safety, policy, outcomes

**Background:**

The *Safe System* approach to road safety was adopted in principle by Australian Road and Transport Ministers through the Australian Transport Council in 2004 [1]. This policy principle now underpins Australian road safety strategies in all jurisdictions in the country [2].

The *Safe System* thinking evolved from the visions that emerged in Sweden and The Netherlands in the mid-1990s and then later from Australia at the turn of the century in 1999 to 2002 [3, 4]. However, the application of this thinking relies on road authorities and others interpreting the principles and planning actions that are consistent with this thinking.

It is said that this approach represents a "paradigm shift" [5,6,7] in road safety approaches. The shift is from treating road injury factors as notionally equal with the underlying assumption that there will always be injury risks inherent in road travel, to conceptualising and pursuing the development and management of a road traffic transport system that is inherently safe for human users. The *Safe System* approach calls for road, vehicle, cyclists, pedestrians and management design parameters that acknowledge human fallibility and vulnerability, and places a biomechanical injury tolerance criterion and consideration of human fallibility, as the central governing principle underpinning any road safety policy decisions.

Under the former epidemiological (Haddon) approach [8] to road safety, discrete injury factors were systematically identified and countermeasures to these factors were implemented, often guided by benefit-cost analysis. For example, in the case of roads and single vehicle crashes through and beyond clear zones, it is still accepted by Australian road design engineers that around 15-20% of people will not recover from

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