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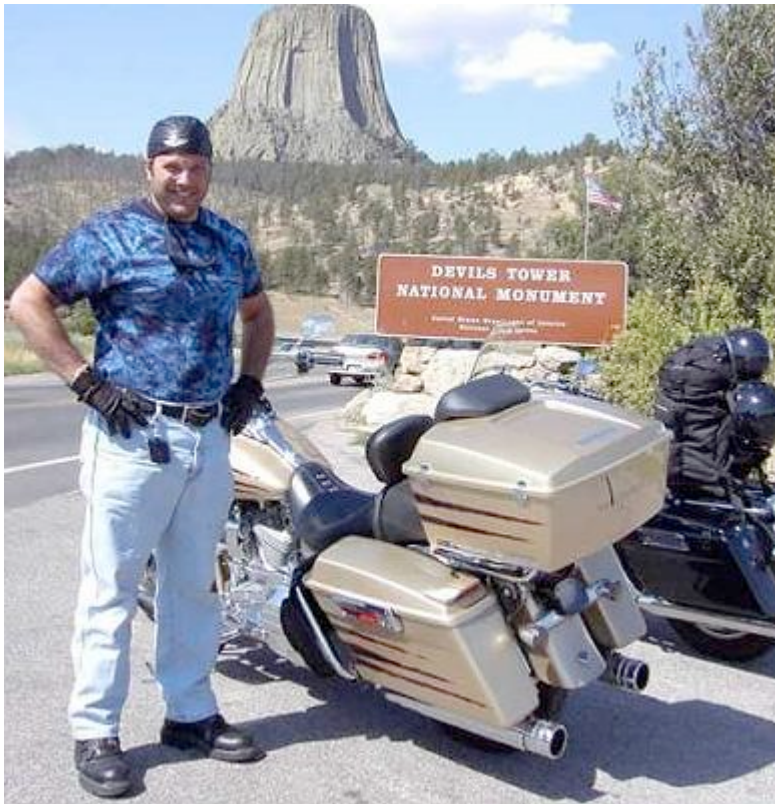
NEWS AND ADVICE

What's up, doc? Many preventable injuries

Local surgeon, biker offers advice on safely enjoying the road

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BY **DAN JEDLICKA** Auto Editor



Dr. David Hanson at Devils Tower National Monument in Wyoming. Bikes are becoming more popular, but with that popularity comes more novice riders, accidents and fatalities. Hanson says.

Motorcycle season has begun here with the arrival of spring. An increasing number of motorcycle riders thus are being seen on roads -- or *not* being seen.

"Many riders get involved in accidents because they don't make themselves visible enough to other vehicles, which hit them because they just don't see them," said Dr. David Hanson, a veteran motorcycle rider who picks up the pieces when those riders become involved in accidents -- some quite serious.

Hanson is an oral and maxillofacial surgeon who is co-founder of the Lincoln Park Institute for Oral and Cosmetic Surgery. If you're a motorcycle fan, he'd probably like to talk with you -- preferably if you're in one piece.

Hanson, a youthful 43, often rides to work at the sprawling Institute on the Near North Side on his powerful, customized Harley Davidson motorcycle from his west suburban home. Hanson and his wife, June, have taken long motorcycle trips to such places as national parks and monuments, enjoying the sights, smells and people offered by America, Canada and Mexico.

"June is very comfortable riding with me on long trips," Hanson said. "She'll occasionally even read a book as we travel. As for my motorcycle commuting, I want to make it home safely each night if only for the sake of my wife and our five children."

But traffic has become so congested in the Chicago area that riding is only totally enjoyable for Hanson in rural areas away from cities, he said in an interview at the institute, where his Harley cruising "bike" was parked.

There are more than 6 million motorcycles registered in America, and more than 276,000 are registered in Illinois. His Harley's license plate reads "I OPR 8."

"Motorcycles are becoming more popular than ever, especially on Chicago area roads. But, with a new wave of novice riders comes a rash of new accident and fatalities," Hanson said. He looks for the recent release of popular motorcycle movies such as "Ghost Rider" to spur even more interest in motorcycles.

That can be good -- and bad. Some 4,008 motorcycle occupants were killed on U.S. roads in 2004, an 8 percent increase from 2003, and 76,000 were injured, say the latest figures from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. About half of all motorcycles involved in a fatal crash collided with another vehicle, and a little more than one-third of cyclists that died were speeding -- about twice the rate for drivers of passenger vehicles or light trucks, it was found. Almost half of the fatal accidents show alcohol involvement.

"Many baby boomers remember having a motorcycle or riding on one when young. So they decide to buy one now," said Hanson, who also owns a powerful Jaguar XKR sports car.

"But some don't start out with slower, more maneuverable motorcycles, as they should. Others forget they no longer have youthful strength or reflexes, don't wear helmets to protect their face from disfigurement and head from brain injuries. They also don't wear special leather clothing that saves skin from damage when they take a spill. And many have no special training to ride.

Unfortunately, that leads motorcycle riders to Hanson for surgery. And you wouldn't want to see some of the X-rays of motorcycle accident victims he operates on.

"One big problem for some riders is that they lose concentration and thus lose contact with surroundings," Hanson said. "When you're on a motorcycle, you lack a car's protection, such as air bags. If you don't watch rearview mirrors, you can get creamed from behind. Some motorcycles are very fast, and a rider can go too fast for conditions or not ride within his skill levels. A novice rider should initially travel with an experienced buddy -- a lot can be learned doing that."

Hanson has these tips for safe motorcycle enjoyment, given in no particular order. Rather, he said their cumulative sum will result in safer riding.

1. TAKE A "RIDER COURSE." The Motorcycle Safety Foundation sponsors beginning and advanced courses at reasonable fees. Even seasoned riders need to refresh critical skills.

2. WEAR PROTECTIVE GEAR. Helmets unconditionally save lives. This is a "no brainer" from a surgeon's point of view. Studies have shown that full face helmets offer the most protection to riders because 35 percent of all crashes showed major impact on the chin-bar area. Brain injuries cause more morbidity and mortality among riders than any other single injury. Proper eye and footwear (above ankle coverage), jeans and/or leathers are preferred clothing.

3. KNOW YOUR LIMITATIONS. Be out for the pure enjoyment of the ride.

4. KNOW YOUR MACHINE. A quick motorcycle check is important. For instance, checking tires for pressures and defects beats a blowout ... at any speed. A quick look at fluids, cables, lights, gear tie-down, etc., can prove time- and life-saving.

5. NEVER TAILGATE OR ALLOW TAILGATING. Do what's necessary to let yourself see the road ahead. Debris and potholes are everywhere and you need time to react. Motorcycles can stop in shorter distances than cars, trucks or SUVs, so give yourself extra space between your bike and everyone else.

6. LEAVE YOURSELF A WAY OUT. Evasive maneuvers can save your life. Keep your eyes moving and scanning when stopped or moving.

7. STAY VISIBLE. Car wins, bike loses. *Always!* Most motor vehicle vs. motorcycle collisions occur because the vehicle driver didn't see the biker. Position yourself so oncoming traffic can see you. Large vehicles require special attention because they can obscure anyone from knowing you are there. Left-turning vehicles are the leading cause of cycle accidents -- that is, both oncoming and cross street traffic. Hanson maximizes his visibility with multiple flashing indicators on all sides of his bike and also uses hand signals.

8. NEVER DRINK AND RIDE. Many surgical patients Hanson cares for have been drinking alcohol or hit by someone who has been imbibing. That's why he prefers not riding late at night on weekends.

9. PRACTICE SKILLS.

10. HAVE FUN! Riding can be a great escape, leaving you free to enjoy machine, countryside, country and the thrill of the ride. Frustration, distraction and complacency should be left behind for another day.

Dan Jedlicka is the Sun-Times' auto editor.