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“Experts: Jury still out on helmet law”

Associated Press

ALLENTOWN - Jamie Lee Hregician was paralyzed from the chest down July 5 when his motorcycle hit a stone wall. But the 19-year-old did not suffer a head injury, and for that he credits his helmet.

"I have no idea what happened," said Hregician, of Alburdis. "The helmet was smashed in the front, but I had no head injuries. Wearing a helmet saved my life."

Nearly a year after Pennsylvania's motorcycle helmet law was repealed, experts say it is too soon to tell definitively whether the repeal has caused a spike in motorcycle injuries and deaths.

In the first four months that helmets became optional for riders 21 and older, deaths among helmetless riders more than doubled, from six to 15, compared with the year-ago period. Fatalities among riders wearing helmets dropped 28 percent, from 25 to 18.

But state and federal transportation officials say it's still too early to tie repeal of the law to deaths caused by a lack of head protection.

"No one here will be able to draw any conclusions," said Ed Myslewicz, a spokesman for the state Department of Transportation.

State Sen. John Wozniak, a Cambria County Democrat and motorcyclist who helped shepherd the bill through the Legislature, said he expected a "small spike" in injuries among helmetless riders, but predicts it will be temporary as riders adjust to their new freedom.

Studies to collect more data are in the works.

Lehigh Valley Hospital in Allentown and St. Luke's Hospital near Bethlehem are keeping track of the bikers who pass through their trauma centers and emergency rooms.

Of the 123 motorcyclists taken to LVH since the repeal, the death rate was higher among patients who did not wear helmets. Four of 31 helmetless riders died; two of the 92 helmeted patients died. Bare-headed riders spent an extra day in the hospital on average.

Conemaugh Medical Center in western Pennsylvania is planning a statewide study that would track motorcycle injuries through community hospitals, coroner and police reports, and trauma centers.

The study would also examine the financial impact on Pennsylvania's taxpayers once the injured cyclists use up their private insurance benefits to pay for their medical care.

"This is where we think we can really make a difference," said Jennifer Balon, a Conemaugh nurse participating in the study. "We will look at the time it takes police officers and coroners to investigate, and we will collect insurance data.

Highway safety and physicians argue that helmets save lives and prevent brain injury.

"To see something that's preventable and have the safety check removed, it's hard to be silent about that," Balon told *The Morning Call* of Allentown for Monday editions.

Wozniak, whose district includes Conemaugh, said he understands the concerns of safety advocates.

However, "I've always been a big believer in the individual right to make a decision. Sometimes I wear a helmet,

sometimes I don't," he said.

Timothy Mcellroy of Palmerton suffered a head injury in a crash Sept. 6, two days after the repeal took effect, and spent two weeks in the hospital and two months in rehab. He was not wearing a helmet.

Despite that, his wife, Melinda, said, "Both of us very much feel it should still be a matter of choice. I don't agree with the seat belt law either."