



Drive to get first aid on the road

St John Ambulance says lives and millions of dollars could be saved by an online course linked to licensing, writes **Keryn McKinnon**

Mandatory first-aid training for drivers could save up to 25 lives on WA roads every year, according to St John Ambulance, which is launching a major campaign to push the initiative.

The organisation wants all new drivers and people renewing their licences to be required to undertake a 30-minute online first-aid course to equip them with the basic skills to save the life of a person involved in a car accident. This comprised two life-saving actions: being able to unblock the airway of an unconscious crash victim and knowing how to stop bleeding.

St John's medical director Garry Wilkes said it took just four minutes for an unconscious road victim to die if their airway was blocked.

"The average response time for an ambulance is about 10 minutes," Dr Wilkes said. "If someone at the scene can unblock a person's airway just by lifting a chin or stop bleeding just by pressing on (the wound), then that person will be alive by the time the ambulance gets there and they will have an extremely good chance of survival."

"We believe 20 to 25 people a year are almost certainly dying on our roads just because somebody does not open an airway or stop bleeding, but instead waits for an ambulance to arrive."

So far this year more than 170 people have died on WA roads. With the annual Christmas holiday rush just three weeks away, St John Ambulance believes it's timely for a public debate about the merits of its proposal.

The life-saving organisation claims successive governments have tried to reduce the road toll through a range of accident prevention measures, including the Office of Road Safety's latest 12-year strategy, *Toward Zero*.

While it was very supportive of preventive action, it believed there would always be accidents that could not be prevented.

Office of Road Safety executive director Iain Cameron said the office's council, comprising representatives from the WA Police, Health and Education departments

and Department for Planning and Infrastructure, strongly supported the principle of promoting first-aid training for all members of the community.

But it stopped short of supporting a push for a compulsory first-aid course for new drivers.

Mr Cameron said the office needed strong evidence to show such a move would work before it went to the State Government recommending law changes to make the course mandatory.

He said to date there was no evidence to show that making every

new driver learn first aid would cut the road toll.

The office believed more education and promotion of first-aid training, and how it could assist in road trauma, was a more appropriate first step.

Mr Cameron said changes to road safety laws needed to be evidence-based and have community support. He likened St John's proposal to the campaign to ban the use of mobile phones while driving.

There had been a community education campaign about the dangers of mobile phone in cars but it was not until there was evidence to show it was causing accidents that laws banning the practice were introduced.

St John's business services director Anthony Smith said the organisation had based its estimations of the number of lives which could be saved on a 2001 study by ARRB Transport Research which investigated all the research carried out on road deaths that could have been avoided by early intervention.

Author Nick Mabbott concluded that the research papers which were reviewed showed a clear reduction in road fatalities could be achieved if bystanders had assisted victims before paramedics arrived.

Most of the research showed this reduction was between 5 and 15 per cent of deaths.

Mr Smith said if all 30,000 new drivers each year were required to



learn just two basic first-aid steps — unblocking the airway and stopping bleeding — about 300 lives could be saved over the 12-year implementation period of the Toward Zero strategy. There would also be a reduction in serious injuries.

“The key is this (course) is really very simple,” Mr Smith said. “There are two techniques that if every driver knows, and has the confidence to apply at a road trauma within the first few minutes, it will save lives.

“Those techniques are firstly, to open the airway of a person who is not breathing, and the second is to know how to stop bleeding.

“They are two skills that every driver needs to know to save between 5 and 15 per cent of road fatalities. It’s easy, it’s simple. This is not about CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation). CPR at road trauma actually has a very, very small positive result.”

Dr Wilkes said it was often the case that bystanders did not want to move someone who had been in a car accident for fear they may cause spinal injury.

But he said if someone was unconscious and slumped over a steering wheel, simply lifting their chin to a normal position, allowing their airway to clear so they could

breathe, would be highly unlikely to cause any spinal damage.

“Gently lifting the chin is all that is required,” he said. “And controlling bleeding is really simple — you just press. It will stop. If it doesn’t, just press harder.

“If nobody does anything, by the time the ambulance gets there, the (victim) is dead.”

Mr Smith said St John estimated its compulsory first-aid proposal would cost \$9.8 million over 12 years. But it believed it would save about 300 lives and estimated the savings to the health system in that time would be about \$298 million.

‘If nobody does anything, by the time the ambulance gets there, the (victim) is dead.’

