Equestrian helmet design questioned

Feedback on the prevention measures suggested in the fact sheet on equestrian injuries distributed in the last issue of the New Zealand Injury Control Bulletin shows that further examination of the design of equestrian helmets is needed if New Zealand riders are to wear them voluntarily.

"While legislation about the wearing of safety helmets is laudable for riding schools, equestrian centres and short horse treks, allowance for a waiver may have to be considered to meet the needs of the high country multi-day horse trekking outfitters - a big draw card for the international adventure tourism industry," said Marilyn Bright of the International League for the Protection of Horses New Zealand. "Horse riding helmets get hotter and more uncomfortable with each new safety standard introduced. Consequently the headache/nosebleed/discomfort/sweat factor can tend to outweigh the 'What If . . .' factor, for many experienced riders embarking on a multi-day ride, when a sun hat or cowboy hat is often deemed more appropriate protective headgear. To overcome this consumer-resistance problem, may I personally suggest that riding helmet designers are obliged to wear their products eight hours per day for eight days on a Southern Alps mountain ride in mid-summer."

One recommendation would be that those who ride in hot conditions wear white helmets. But the answer to the league's problem may already exist. An air vent helmet has been designed in the United States, which is similar in design to the air vent bicycle helmet. So, why not wear a bicycle helmet when riding a horse? Bicycle helmet standards are developed on the basis of what problems the cyclist may encounter and the fact that the cyclist almost always falls onto the side or front of the head. The equestrian rider is far more likely to fall onto the back of the head so a lower back on the helmet is imperative to provide adequate protection and safety.

The joint Australian and New Zealand Standard for Helmets AS/NZ 3838:1998 Helmets for Horse Riding and Horse-Related Activities contains strict requirements for the amount of impact a helmet has to be able to absorb in the event of a blow to the head. It is worthy to note that the equestrian helmet is intended to withstand only a single high severity impact blow. The test uses a sharp edged anvil like an inverted V to simulate the horse's hoof and the top of a pointed fence post, which is common around riding facilities.

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