Essential Evidence on a page. No.13:
Cycling reduces absenteeism at the workplace

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There has been interest in the link between physical activity, absenteeism and productivity for a number of decades. Simply put, the hypothesis is that the more physically active are likely to have a lower level of absenteeism due to the unequivocal evidence that physical activity substantially reduces the risk of ill-health and premature death. In 2007 a high level Evidence Review was conducted for Transport for London to assess the peer-reviewed evidence.[1] The most significant finding was that an increase in physical activity of more than one hour per week, easily achieved by walking or cycling to work, would be expected to lead to a measurable reduction in levels of absenteeism. The authors concluded that this was of clear commercial benefit to employers and supported the business case for investing in workplace travel plans. No studies were found directly reporting on active travel and absenteeism and productivity.

In Febraury 2009, TNO, a Dutch contract research organisation, published research directly studying the relation between commuting by bicycle, work performance and absenteeism.[2] Among employees of three major Dutch organisations an electronic survey was conducted into commuting to work by bicycle in relation to health and work performance. Data on absenteeism of the respondents were provided by the employers, for the year preceding the questionnaire. Of the 1236 employees 64% cycled to work regularly, and 36% did not cycle at all. Regular commuters missed significantly fewer days a year than non-cyclists: on average 7.4 days a year (cyclists) compared to 8.7 days a year (non-cyclists). There was also a relationship between distance, commute frequency and degree of absenteeism: the more often and the greater the distance, the lower the absenteeism.

Health proved to be the main reason for regular cyclists to commute by bicycle. To non-cyclists the major impediments, apart from the distance being too great to cycle, were the weather and arriving at work all sweaty. They indicated that living closer to work as well as a decrease in commuting time in comparison with other transport modes might persuade them into commuting by bicycle.

In an allied survey, of 879 participating HR managers 48% stated their company promotes commuting by bicycle. This occurs mainly by providing facilities such as showers and bicycle parking. The three main ways of encouraging companies to stimulate commuting by bicycle were:

- Government subsidies, such as raising the gross amount to be spent on a company bicycle;
- Knowledge as to the profits of these type of investments;
- Collaboration with a company to professionally stimulate commuting by bicycle. Over three-quarters of respondents were unfamiliar with the current campaigns or organisations stimulating commuting to work by bicycle.

Top line: Employees regularly cycling to work are ill less often. A 1% increase in regular commuting by bicycle would translate into savings of approximately 27 million Euro (£24M) per annum for employers, as calculated by TNO.

Conflict of interest declaration: Co-author of Reference 1.

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[1] Davis, A., Jones, M. 2007 *Physical activity, absenteeism and productivity: An Evidence Review*. Project Report UPR T/102/07. Transport Research Laboratory: Crowthorne.

[2] http://www.tno.nl/downloads/KvL-L.09-01.971Nm_laag%20DEF.pdf (In Dutch) accessed 6th March 2009.