

# HEALTHY AGEING

Heather Zubek

8

## Gophers have wheel-good factor

Mobility scooters can transform the lives of many elderly and disabled people in our community

**T**hursday mornings are particularly eventful for the information desk staff at Westfield Carousel Shopping Centre. Ann, one of the customer service staff members is busy helping her regular customers with the hiring of gophers.

Yvonne Neillings, 83, arrives ready for her weekly shop and Joyce Fletcher, 73, comes along helped by her husband. Both women agree that they wouldn't be able to do their shopping had it not been for the availability of the centre's gophers.

The mobility scooter or gopher has transformed the lives of the elderly and disabled who in the past have been housebound or had to rely on others for transportation.

More and more shopping centres are providing free access to gophers because some of their customers are finding it more difficult to negotiate the bigger malls.

The West Australian contacted most shopping centres within the Perth metropolitan area and all of them had a stable of gophers available for customer use. Most centres request prior booking and all gophers were available free of charge.

Jason Gwatkin, national sales manager for Shoprider Australia, has been supplying some of the bigger shopping centres with gophers for over two years.

"I find that the centres are increasing their number of gophers and wanting a variety of sizes to suit their customers," he said.

According to Mr Gwatkin the type of gopher required by many of the centres today needs to be able to take heavier loads, a fact also mentioned by Peter Fraser, managing director, finance and marketing of Scooters Australia.

"There certainly has been an increase in the use of gophers in shopping malls and the major change that I have seen over the past 20 years is the request for higher capacity gophers able to take up to 200kg," he said.

Mr Fraser presented a paper reviewing the use of gophers as part of the 2009 mobility scooter reference group meeting with the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC).

The national meeting was convened in response to concerns about an alarming number of



### Go for it to increase your shopping independence

**Joyce Fletcher**, above left, has been hiring gophers from Carousel for over two years. After having knee replacement surgery, Mrs Fletcher found walking difficult and now, with the aid of her husband, shops while riding the gopher.

"It used to take such a long time to shop," says Mrs Fletcher. "I had to stop every now and then to rest. Now it takes half the time."

**Yvonne Neillings**, above right, is an old hand at driving. As a retired driving instructor the gopher held little fear for her.

"I wouldn't be without it. It's a wonderfully easy way for me to do my shopping," says Mrs Neillings, who has been hiring a gopher from the shopping centre for over 13 years.

Mrs Neillings, who still has her driving licence, finds walking the long distances around shopping centres a little daunting.

Both women agree that the availability of gophers within the shopping centre has made a difference to their weekly outings.

injuries and deaths on motorised scooters since 2000. A report compiled by the Monash University Accident Research Centre, published in March this year, stated there were at least 442 falls from motorised scooters leading to hospitalisation from July 2006 to June 2008, mainly for lower limb injury and affecting men and women about equally.

From July 2000 to August 2010 there were 62 deaths, most as a result of collisions with cars, with men over 80 heavily represented.

"There are certain safety issues that shopping mall management should be aware of such as the accessibility of lifts and pathways and the speed with which gophers should travel within the centre," Mr Fraser said.

"We pre-program our gophers to travel no more than 4-5km/h when we sell them to shopping malls. It is just a safety issue."

If there are accidents involving

gophers within shopping centres it is generally a result of the user not being aware of the gopher's limitations.

"It's important that the shopping mall staff train new gopher riders on the use of the machine," he said.

According to Mr Fraser, most of

### More shopping centres are providing free access to gophers because some customers are finding it difficult to negotiate the bigger malls.

the purchasers of scooters are aged over 80.

"For this age group, scooter use is more than 2.75 times safer than using the roads and significantly safer than being a pedestrian," he said.

Gerri Clay, Independent Living Centre executive director said scooter users were classified as

pedestrians and had to follow the relevant road rules.

"Gophers should be used on footpaths, shared paths, within shopping centres, public places and they must use pedestrian crossings in order to cross the road," Ms Clay said.

Gophers are not legally

with compulsory third party insurance, ensuring that other pedestrians are protected when an injury results from a collision with a gopher.

The two gopher regulars at Westfield Carousel Shopping Centre have experienced few problems during their shopping expeditions.

Obstructed shop doorways or people talking on mobile phones blocking their path were the only hazards encountered.

They agreed it was a small price to pay for freedom and independence.

**The Independent Living Centre has a free information and advisory service for people seeking to buy gophers. The centre has a selection of models on display and an outdoor area where they can be "road-tested". Call the Independent Living Centre on 1300 885 886.**

## Tips for safety when out and about on a mobility scooter

### GENERAL

Stay within the legal speed limit of 10km/h.

Be aware that taking medication or driving under the influence of alcohol may affect the user's judgment.

If you are carrying parcels, ensure that the load will not overbalance your motorised mobility device and that the

parcels do not interfere with your controls or vision.

### PROTECTIVE GEAR

Always make sure that you are clearly visible, particularly at night or on dull days — use the lights and reflectors and install a reflective safety flag at a height detectable to motorists.

Wear a bicycle helmet whenever possible.

### PEDESTRIANS AND FOOTPATHS

Slow down when you are near other people, especially pedestrians and cyclists.

Avoid stopping or driving on inclines that are beyond your scooter's capabilities.

Use footpaths if possible. If there are no

footpaths, plan to use quieter roads.

Plan your trip and avoid uneven surfaces, dips and potholes.

**Source: Product Safety Australia, Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. For more information: Help cut mobility scooter accidents at productsafety.gov.au, published by the ACCC.**