THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

Bicycling as a Way of Life

For Dr. Christiane Stahl, bicycling is not so much a hobby as a way of life. She's been commuting by bike to school or work since she was 8 years old.

"I use public transportation, but the nice thing about a bike is you're kind of out there on your own," said Dr. Stahl of the department of pediatrics at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "It's a little more individual and gives you more time for reflection. You're not distracted by all the social interactions that are going on when you take public transportation." Every day she bikes 5 miles to work "if it's not actively precipitating and the wind is not more than 20 miles an hour against me."

Even Chicago's harsh winter days don't stop her. "I have little booties that I put over my bike shoes and big puffy bike gloves and hats to wear under my helmet," she said.

No special tires are required during her winter commutes because the route she takes includes a network of bike lanes that "get cleared out pretty well" by the city's snowplows. However, degradation of the bike chain from road salt is an ongoing issue.

Among her favorite vacations are bike trips she's taken through Germany, Wisconsin, and South Carolina. Her easiest and most spontaneous trip "was on the back of a tandem bicycle around the Chicago area—taking advantage of the great trail system, the outdoor concert area of Ravinia Park, and views of Lake Michigan," she said.

An advocate for bike safety, Dr. Stahl has served as a medical volunteer for Bank of America's Bike the Drive, an annual bike ride along scenic Lake Shore Drive that benefits the Active Transportation Alliance, a not-for-profit biking, walking, and transit advocacy organization.

She noted that as more people take up bicycling as an inexpensive and environmentally friendly commuting tactic, upgrades in the separation of auto and bicycle traffic will be needed.

Courtesy Dr. Christiane Stahl

Dr. Christiane Stahl bikes 5 miles to work every day in Chicago.

"Until we do that, we're going to see rising rates of injury, because I think more people will turn to bicycling as a way of getting around," she said. "Compared with Europe, we have so far to go in terms of creating safer bikeways. I'm hopeful that will occur over the next decade or 2."

A self-described devoted helmet wearer, Dr. Stahl had one serious injury on a bike: a low-speed face plant when she dropped a wheel into a grate on the sidewalk. "Fortunately, I was just outside the hospital emergency room," she said. "I got a fair number of facial lacerations, but I didn't have any head injury."

While she knows her share of bicyclists who set goals to improve their speed or endurance—and fret about reaching those goals—Dr. Stahl is content to enjoy bicycling on her terms. ■

By Doug Brunk

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The purpose of "The Rest of Your Life" is to celebrate the interests and passions of physicians outside of medicine. If you have an idea for this column or would like to tell your story, send an e-mail to d.brunk@elsevier.com.