

WAV Safety Podcast

[00:00:00] **Marcus Binet:** Welcome to Get to the Point. A podcast series by the New South Wales Point to Point Transport Commissioner. The Commissioner is the independent regulator for point to point transport in New South Wales, which includes taxis, hire vehicles and rideshare, and some community transport and tourist operators.

[00:00:27] In this series, you'll hear from industry representatives and from subject matter experts as we explore topics relevant to point to point transport and work together to ensure a safer industry. Hello, I'm your host, Marcus Binet; and today we are speaking about safe point to point transport in wheelchair accessible taxis and vehicles.

[00:00:51] In New South Wales, wheelchair accessible taxis and vehicles provide a vital service for people who travel with wheelchairs. To discuss the safety in wheelchair accessible vehicles I'm joined by Declan Lee who uses wheelchair accessible vehicles in his day-to-day life. Welcome Declan.

[00:01:10] **Declan Lee:** Yep.

[00:01:10] **Marcus Binet:** Wheelchair Accessible Vehicle driver and qualified trainer, Antonio Estevez.

[00:01:16] Welcome, Antonio.

[00:01:17] **Antonio Esteves:** Thank you.

[00:01:17] **Marcus Binet:** And subject matter expert from Point to Point, Lisa Rosenquist.

[00:01:21] We appreciate you all being here today to discuss this important topic for the industry.

Chapter 1: Meet Declan

[00:01:28] The first question I want to ask of you, Declan, is can you just talk about, or explain to us, how you use wheelchair accessible vehicles in your day to day life?

[00:01:36] Like, how often, what kind of trips you do, and where do you need to go?

[00:01:39] **Declan Lee:** Sure. Thank you for having me here to start with.

[00:01:44] I use taxis on a very regular basis. So, almost every day... sometimes two, three times a day.

[00:01:51] I've been working kind of part time and in uni full time as well, and then I've got all the other kind of doctor's appointments and social things.

[00:02:00] So I use taxis as my main kind of mode of transportation.

[00:02:05] and the reason for that is because I find it difficult to use public transport.

[00:02:11] **Marcus Binet:** Hmm.

[00:02:12] **Declan Lee:** Buses aren't very big for wheelchairs and I've also got an assistant dog Cara, who I've got here today, and it just provides enough space for both me and the dog to be transported safely.

[00:02:27] **Marcus Binet:** And do you have a number of different drivers or is it one single driver?

[00:02:31] **Declan Lee:** I typically have one driver that I use on a daily basis, but I've also got a couple of backup drivers in case he can't make it.

[00:02:41] Like for today!

[00:02:42] Today for example, my regular driver wasn't able to pick me up this afternoon. He already had another booking. Um so he reached out to one of his colleagues, who then reached out to Antonio, who's here today.

Chapter 2 – Meet the trainer

[00:02:58] **Marcus Binet:** And because you've been driving, Antonio, how long have you been driving wheelchair vehicles for?

[00:03:02] **Antonio Esteves:** I started in 1996. I was called into the office, the supervisor - his name was Harry he's now retired, and there was another gentleman there by the name of Paul that's sadly no longer with us anymore either.

[00:03:14] - and they just brought Maxi Taxis from Brisbane. They were modified in Brisbane.

[00:03:19] He asked me if I was interested and I went with my “eyes wide closed”, if that makes sense. I had no friends with disabilities, I didn't know anything about people with disabilities.

[00:03:29] And I said, well, I'll give it a go, you know, three months, six months, if it doesn't work out, I'll go back to Sedans and, um...

[00:03:36] **Marcus Binet:** And yet you're still in it!

[00:03:37] **Antonio Esteves:** And what, nearly 30 years later, I'm still here. Yes.

[00:03:41] **Marcus Binet:** Why?

[00:03:42] **Antonio Esteves:** I don't know.

[00:03:43] Just the satisfaction that it gives me, apart from anything, it's just - there are people of incredible, different diversities and backgrounds.

[00:03:51] You meet incredible people. People with disabilities that don't want sympathy or that, they just want a bit of understanding and that's it. Yeah.

[00:04:00] **Marcus Binet:** So, you've been the industry for a long while.

[00:04:02] **Antonio Esteves:** Yes, yes.

Chapter 3 – What drivers need to know

[00:04:02] **Marcus Binet:** And now you're running the training. Tell us a little bit about how the training is structured and how it works - and what drivers need to know.

[00:04:09] **Antonio Esteves:** Well, when drivers come into training courses, they have to be proficient in three things.

[00:04:15] Mainly, the communication skills. They have to understand communication, the ability to speak with a passenger with a disability. Not just the physical, but also intellectual disabilities.

[00:04:28] They have to understand the process of restraining the wheelchair correctly, and then the process of securing the passenger correctly.

[00:04:36] **Marcus Binet:** And so, in terms of regulation, Lisa, the main points of the regulations say you've got loading, restraint and unloading. What does that mean?

[00:04:45] **Lisa Rosenquist:** Drivers need to demonstrate that they're competent in the safe loading, securing and unloading of passengers in wheelchairs and that is most commonly done by training courses.

[00:04:57] **Marcus Binet:** And so, where can people do those training courses?

[00:05:00] **Lisa Rosenquist:** Training courses can be delivered in-house. They can be done by third parties, or they could be done in a combination of those two ways.

[00:05:07] Service providers also need to, throughout the driver's career, provide opportunities and resources such that the driver can maintain that competency throughout their whole career.

[00:05:17] They also need to be able to show, on their safety management system, that they are making plans and making provisions for drivers to be able to remain competent and have access to refresher courses and that kind of thing.

[00:05:29] **Marcus Binet:** So it's actually the service provider's responsibility to ensure that the drivers remain competent.

[00:05:33] **Lisa Rosenquist:** Exactly.

[00:05:34] **Marcus Binet:** And so, to be competent, they can do the formal training course, like you run Antonio.

[00:05:39] There's a theoretical part and a practical part, isn't there, to that?

[00:05:42] What does the theoretical part cover of the course?

[00:05:45] **Antonio Esteves:** Well, the theoretical part covers everything from customer service, to where you can park, where you can load.

[00:05:51] My job is the practical side of the training because it doesn't matter how well they do in the classroom, because when they come down to me, in my professional opinion, if they're not competent to go on to then secure a passenger like Declan in their vehicles, well then they're not going to pass!

[00:06:09] That's my role in the training.

[00:06:11] **Marcus Binet:** Yeah, the assessing of their practical capabilities.

[00:06:14] So then Declan, what makes a good wheelchair accessible vehicle driver, do you reckon?

[00:06:19] **Declan Lee:** They've just got to be friendly in nature, they've got to be courteous.

[00:06:23] I think also to have ingenuity as well and show initiative, and so, a good way to do that would be to ask the passenger – “what

can I help you with? where are you going? how would you like to get there?" that sort of thing. And then, once we're getting loaded into the taxi itself, sometimes depending on the variation of wheelchair, it can be helpful to show the driver where the hooks are, because each wheelchair is different - so the hooks would be in different places.

[00:06:52] It can sometimes be a little bit confusing for the driver. So I always found it helpful to do that. As Antonio said before, don't show sympathy. We just want to get on with our day - and do that in the most efficient way possible.

[00:07:05] **Marcus Binet:** Yeah. And so, (cause I did the training not long ago, Antonio)

[00:07:08] One of the things was about good communication between the passenger and the driver. And there were a few things in there which were really simple, practical things which are good to do.

[00:07:17] One of which was make sure that you're at the same face level, head level, as the person.

[00:07:21] What other kind of things are just practical tips, I guess you'd say, that make communication between a driver and a passenger better?

[00:07:28] **Antonio Esteves:** When you restrain a wheelchair, a lot of the work is done behind their backs.

[00:07:31] **Marcus Binet:** Yes.

[00:07:32] **Antonio Esteves:** So it's the courtesy of communicating with a passenger and tell the passenger what you're doing.

[00:07:38] **Declan Lee:** Yeah.

[00:07:38] **Antonio Esteves:** Because the passenger in the wheelchair, they might be deaf.

[00:07:41] **Marcus Binet:** Yeah.

[00:07:42] **Antonio Esteves:** But they can see you.

[00:07:42] So you just approach them and say, well, this is what we're doing. And when you're a face, you know, eye to eye level, they can read your lips. You might have a passenger that's blind. Well again, we need to explain to them, because if you have a blind passenger in a wheelchair and then all of a sudden they feel something over their shoulders and they haven't been told what it is.

[00:08:05] So communication, It's a very, very important part of the exercise.

[00:08:08] **Marcus Binet:** Yeah, you're nodding.

[00:08:09] **Declan Lee:** And also, look, I'm deaf as well, and I always find it helpful... because the driver is often behind me and restraining the back of my wheelchair.

[00:08:20] But sometimes I'm not always in the right position or I need to move forward or backwards. So, I always find it helpful for the driver to come back and face me and say, look, I just need you to move a few inches forwards or a few inches backwards so I can get the restraints in properly.

[00:08:37] I always encourage that as well, because that just shows the initiative of the driver. That also demonstrates that good communication skills are really important.

[00:08:47] **Marcus Binet:** Yeah.

[00:08:48] **Antonio Esteves:** The positioning of the wheelchair in the vehicle, it should be done before we even restrain.

[00:08:53] It comes with experience as well. So, I'm trying to tell new drivers, well, you know, just allow yourself a distance between the vehicle and the passenger without coming into contact with the passenger's legs or wheelchair or anything like that.

[00:09:08] Because you've got ample room at the back to move the wheelchair back and forth. Now, a manual wheelchair, well, then it's

the driver who's going to position the wheelchair before they lock the brakes.

[00:09:17] And an electric wheelchair, they don't have to push anything. It's the passenger who drives the wheelchair. So, it's up to the driver to say, okay, lock it, sit a bit further forward, or just slide it back, or whatever, before they then turn off the machine. The wheelchair brakes automatically come on.

[00:09:38] But then it doesn't mean that the wheelchair is secure. Then it's coming at the driver that go and put the restraints in properly.

[00:09:45] **Marcus Binet:** Yeah. It was interesting. You were nodding, Declan, when Antonio was talking about talking to someone from behind. I remember when I did the training - that you don't think about it.

[00:09:54] You've got somebody there in the wheelchair, but you don't think, well, you know, if they're partially deaf, it's better for me to go around the front and say, look, I've just got to do this. And then you come back around.

Chapter 4: Service Provider Responsibilities

[00:10:01] And so I guess that's the driver's side of it. So then coming back to the service provider side of it, what are the legal safety obligations on service providers?

[00:10:11] **Lisa Rosenquist:** Service providers have a lot of obligations that they have to comply with. And I think first and foremost, they need to give priority to a person using a wheelchair - to provide them with the service, if we're talking about a wheelchair accessible vehicle.

[00:10:25] In addition, there are dimension requirements in the back of the vehicle.

[00:10:29] There's height requirements, obviously depth and width requirements - and also the requirement that a wheelchair accessible vehicle must carry a child restraint as well.

[00:10:37] We've talked already about driver competence and how that should be checked and double checked right at the beginning during onboarding, and maintained throughout the driver's career.

[00:10:46] **Marcus Binet:** Mm-Hmm.

[00:10:47] **Lisa Rosenquist:** And the other essential thing, I think for the day-to-day success of a journey, if I could call it that, is letting the passenger know what the arrival time is expected to be - with some notice.

[00:10:58] **Marcus Binet:** Mmm.

[00:10:58] **Lisa Rosenquist:** Because people who use wheelchairs may take a little longer to dash out the front door, than someone who possibly is more mobile.

[00:11:06] Service providers also need to have an agreement with SCIA. That's Spinal Cord Injuries Australia. And they currently are the operators of the Wheelchair Book and Ride service in Sydney. So having that arrangement allows wheelchair users to be able to easily book services within the metropolitan area.

[00:11:23] We've got a lot of resources on our website to help service providers understand their obligations. The list that I've just laid out for you is not everything, but gives a good starting point for service providers.

[00:11:34] **Marcus Binet:** Yep.

[00:11:35] So you mentioned the responsibility for the drivers, which is the initial training, which is what we're just talking about with Antonio.

[00:11:40] Yeah. And then there's the ongoing part of it as well.

[00:11:42] **Lisa Rosenquist:** Yeah.

[00:11:43] When I did my training, actually, there was a chap on the course who said, I haven't got my vehicle yet and it's going to be another year or so before I can save up to buy it.

Chapter 5 – What type of wheelchair is suitable to remain seated in?

[00:11:50] So we've actually developed a checklist for drivers. Maybe they have had, you know, even a couple of months abroad or some time out of the industry, to be able to just refresh their knowledge.

[00:11:59] It can help jog people's memories. It's something that they can keep in the glove box to just try and remember - "what do I need to do, and in what order".

[00:12:06] **Marcus Binet:** So that's a checklist that they can use to remind them what they need to do when they're picking somebody up, or have a booking with them.

[00:12:13] Okay. And so, then, because you were saying about the industry changing, the other thing that changes a lot is wheelchairs themselves.

[00:12:19] And you've mentioned some of the resources.

[00:12:22] What resources are there to help drivers know what wheelchairs they can and can't use?

[00:12:26] **Lisa Rosenquist:** So, we've got a quick reference guide that is a nice visual guide of wheelchairs that are likely to be suitable for a passenger to remain seated in during the journey.

[00:12:35] Of course, we can transport any type of wheelchair, but - *can the passenger remain seated in it* - is the million dollar question here.

[00:12:42] So to be able to know that for sure, a wheelchair user would want to check the manufacturer's instruction booklet or the other documentation that comes with a wheelchair.

[00:12:51] And I'd actually advise, if you're out in the market, buying a wheelchair, that you do that at that point in time, you don't want to spend a lot of money on a wheelchair and find that it isn't suitable. So, there's certain Australian standards, I won't quote the numbers now, but they need to be met in order for the wheelchair to be safe for a passenger to remained seated in during the journey.

[00:13:10] **Marcus Binet:** Yeah. And do you find that people will call for a taxi and they don't have the right kind of wheelchair?

[00:13:17] **Antonio Esteves:** Uh, mobility scooters... the passenger cannot sit on it.

[00:13:21] We can transport the scooters, not a problem - the scooters can be restrained, but not safely with a passenger in it. So, they'll have to go onto a seat.

[00:13:31] **Marcus Binet:** So, what happens, Antonio, if you have somebody who insists that they should stay in their mobility device or on their mobility scooter - and be loaded in the taxi when the device itself is not suitable for travelling in?

[00:13:42] **Antonio Esteves:** Yeah, it was very simple.

[00:13:43] You just explain to them what the rules are. The regulations, and the safety aspect of them travelling in the mobility scooter.

[00:13:51] If they still argue with you, and I tell the drivers in the course, I say, do not argue with the passenger. Just tell them that, what the regulations are, and if they still insist they want to be in the scooter, just tell them that you won't be able to take them.

[00:14:03] Simple. That's it.

[00:14:06] You know, you just ring the network and what we call a code is an M3, which is the passenger refuses to remove themselves from the scooter to get into a regular car seat and that's it.

[00:14:20] **Marcus Binet:** Well, it's a safety issue.

[00:14:21] **Antonio Esteves:** That's right. Absolutely it is.

[00:14:23] **Marcus Binet:** Yeah.

[00:14:23] **Antonio Esteves:** Yeah.

[00:14:23] **Marcus Binet:** And you must

[00:14:24] have seen wheelchairs change quite a lot, have you Declan?

[00:14:25] **Declan Lee:** Yeah, it's funny you say that, because I'm actually in the process of getting a new wheelchair at the moment.

[00:14:31] That's definitely one of the first things I do when I purchase or I'm looking at new wheelchairs to make sure that it's not only comfortable, but can also be restrained easily.

[00:14:45] **Marcus Binet:** do you ever have any problems with your wheelchair?

[00:14:47] **Declan Lee:** No, I mean, not with restraining, no, but definitely, my wheelchair can break down every once in a while.

Chapter 6 – Restraining and securing your passenger

[00:14:53] **Lisa Rosenquist:** Just to be clear, there should be two restraint hooks on the chair at the back and two on the front. And it's really important that only they are used to restrain the wheelchair to the floor of the vehicle with straps that are the correct ones to be used in the vehicle.

[00:15:11] **Marcus Binet:** We've talked about the wheelchairs and the drivers.

[00:15:13] The person responsible for, obviously, you being appropriately secured in the vehicle is the driver. So what can a caregiver, or a family member, or someone like that, (because the driver does all the securing), how can that person help, or what can they do?

[00:15:28] **Declan Lee:** Yeah, so I think, also it depends on the journey.

[00:15:32] The taxi driver has a responsibility to ensure passenger safety. I think also, too, speaking to what Antonio said before, it's also about customer service.

[00:15:43] Sometimes I'll need help with carrying shopping bags into the car or, carrying extra mobility equipment.

[00:15:50] I also use a walking frame, so occasionally I'll be taking that with me.

[00:15:55] Same thing with my assistance dog.

[00:15:57] Occasionally, I'll need help to load her into the vehicle as well.

[00:16:03] I think for me, a taxi driver is a multitude of tasks.

[00:16:06] **Marcus Binet:** Yeah. And that's a very good point, actually.

[00:16:08] If people see situations like that where something that's not safe has happened or there've been a safety incident, what can they do in that situation?

[00:16:15] **Lisa Rosenquist:** I would really encourage anyone to report any safety issue that they see at all. In the first instance, the advice would be to report it to the service provider who sent the vehicle.

[00:16:25] But if you aren't satisfied with their response at all, then please report it to the Point to Point Transport Commission.

[00:16:31] The Commissioner takes all complaints, especially of a safety nature, very seriously. We've got an online contact form, or we've got a phone number on our website, 131 727, you could give us a call.

[00:16:43] And of course, all the details would be taken and it would be treated as serious - as it should be.

Chapter 7 – Final Thoughts

[00:16:49] **Marcus Binet:** In terms of final thoughts, final observations, Antonio, what would be your observations or thoughts on the industry, having been in it for 20 years?

[00:16:58] **Antonio Esteves:** When it comes to safety of transporting people with a disability, it's incumbent on the government or Point to Point in this case, to make sure that whoever's transported is done correctly and safely.

[00:17:11] **Marcus Binet:** And Declan, thoughts?

[00:17:13] I'm going to be catching taxis for the rest of my life.

[00:17:17] My disability is not going to change. I've always been a big supporter of the taxi industry because without them I wouldn't be able to leave the house. I mean, I could still leave the house and go for walks, that sort of thing but I wouldn't be able to get to my appointments.

[00:17:32] I wouldn't be able to go out and meet my friends socially, I wouldn't be able to go to uni or go to work.

[00:17:39] I rely on taxis as my basically number one support service.

[00:17:47] Also in my experience, being a person with a disability who relies on taxis on a daily basis, sometimes, it can be difficult to get a wheelchair taxi.

[00:17:58] And so, I think it would be helpful to monitor that situation and come up with ways to make that a little bit easier for people with disabilities.

[00:18:06] I'm one of the few fortunate people who have regular drivers. I know that not everyone has that sort of luxury, for lack of a better word, it's not really a luxury, but it's just, I'm grateful that I've got that connection and my taxi driver, even though I've got a good working relationship with him, we've also become good friends almost because I've known him for 10 years. It's been really valuable to me.

[00:18:35] **Marcus Binet:** Yeah, so it's a lot more than just a car to go from A to B.

[00:18:38] **Declan Lee:** Correct.

[00:18:39] **Marcus Binet:** It's an ongoing relationship.

[00:18:41] **Declan Lee:** Yeah.

[00:18:41] **Marcus Binet:** For good or bad, yeah.

[00:18:42] That's great. Lisa, any final thoughts?

[00:18:44] **Lisa Rosenquist:** I think exactly what Declan said - realising that as a wheelchair accessible vehicle driver, you are so much more than a taxi driver, especially to the recipient of that service.

[00:18:54] You know, they really, really need that taxi. It is the safest way to get them from their home to the place that they need to go, at a time that's convenient to them.

[00:19:02] And secondly, just in terms of safety, drivers of any vehicle in point to point need to do pre-departure checks. But with the wheelchair accessible vehicle, there's a number of other checks that need to be done.

[00:19:13] Check the hoist and the ramp work and are in good condition; and the restraint straps are all in really good order. Those are just an extra thing that a driver needs to do if they're going to run a wheelchair accessible vehicle successfully and safely.

[00:19:25] **Marcus Binet:** So, Declan, you mentioned before Cara, your assistance dog who you travel with. Has that made getting taxis more difficult? Have you had refusals?

[00:19:35] **Declan Lee:** Unfortunately, it has made getting access to our wheelchair taxis a little bit difficult in some cases.

[00:19:42] Mainly if I don't know the driver and the driver doesn't know me,

[00:19:46] they've occasionally refused me to be in the vehicle with my assistance dog. And I've had other drivers,

[00:19:54] who, um,

who have said, "oh, I don't really want to take your assistance dog. I'll take you, but I won't take your assistance dog because I don't want to get dog hair in the car" or things like that. And that's been another type of rejection as well.

[00:20:13] It's not as straightforward as outright rejection, but it's still - it's that mentality of saying, "Oh, I'll take you, but I don't really want to take your dog".

[00:20:22] That makes me feel pretty uncomfortable and upset as well. I often say to them, look, by law you have to take the assistance dog.

[00:20:31] You know, she's an accredited assistance dog. I can show you the identification I've got that demonstrates that she is an accredited assistance dog.

[00:20:41] And if you have any problems, talk to your service provider, the Point to Point Commission or NSW Transport.

[00:20:50] They have all those contacts as well so they know who to talk to if they're not sure what the rules are.

[00:20:57] **Declan Lee:** So, for example, sometimes I need assistance getting the dog in the car. So what happens, and Antonio will eventually find out for himself when he takes me home today, is that often it's best that I get loaded in first and then Cara will jump in the cab after me and she'll sit beside me in the passenger area.

[00:21:18] Assistance dogs are, you know, they're friendly, they're trained to respond and to respond to other people, aside from myself.

[00:21:28] It's a matter of being courteous and being open to communicate. I know some people are afraid of dogs and that can be an issue as well, but I also think, and I don't know if you share the same agreement here, Antonio, but if you are afraid of dogs, you shouldn't really be working in this industry.

[00:21:48] **Marcus Binet:** We did another podcast, rather, on assistance animals and all of those issues - because it is illegal not to take somebody who has an assistance animal.

Thank you very much for your time.

Thanks, Antonio.

Antonio Esteves: Thank you.

Marcus Binet: Thanks, Declan.

Declan Lee: Thank you.

Marcus Binet: And thank you, Lisa.

Lisa Rosenquist: You're welcome.

Marcus Binet: [00:22:04] Thank you again for sharing your knowledge and thoughts today, and I hope the session has been informative for WAV drivers and service providers, for passengers who travel with wheelchairs, and for the people who book wheelchair accessible services.

[00:22:19] If you want more information, we've developed a Toolkit on wheelchair accessible vehicle safety, which is available on our website. If you found this information useful, please feel free to share this recording.

[00:22:33] My name's Marcus Binet, and this podcast is brought to you by the Point to Point Transport Commissioner.

[00:22:39] Thanks for joining us.