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Strengths and limitations of older drivers

01:00 AM EDT on Wednesday, March 28, 2007

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Memorial Hospital in Pawtucket and AARP held a two-day workshop last week for drivers over 55.

The Providence Journal / Steve Szydlowski

It is a cliché of modern times that older drivers are as much a menace on the roads as younger drivers.

But the numbers indicate that while older drivers are involved in more accidents than drivers between the ages of 30 and 65, they no way compare with the rates for the most dangerous group: young male drivers.

However, every so often an older driver, usually suffering from dementia, initiates a sensational accident that garners national attention — plowing into a crowded market place, for example — and the cry goes up to either get older drivers off the roads or at least initiate special driving tests for them.

The truth is far more complicated.

“There are spectacular crashes involving demented older drivers, but they are the exception,” said Dr. Jeffrey M. Borkan, chairman of family medicine at Memorial Hospital of Rhode Island and Brown Medical School. “Older people drive more safely than teenagers.”

Dr. Brian Ott agreed. Ott is professor of clinical neuroscience at Brown Medical School and works at the Neurology Foundation at Rhode Island Hospital, where he conducts research into the driving impairment associated with people with early Alzheimer’s.

“It’s not being fair,” he said of the media attention focused on dramatic accidents involving older drivers. “Those people have dementia. Healthy older drivers are quite safe. They may not drive as well or as skillfully, but (they compensate by) driving less or more slowly.”

“There is a waning of the senses, the eyes, motor reflexes and hearing (being) the big ones,” said Borkan of growing old. “But that is counterbalanced by two things — wisdom and judgment: lower risk-taking, greater adherence to driving laws, and restraint with drinking and driving.”

Dr. Melissa M. Amick, Ph.D., staff psychologist at Memorial Hospital of Rhode Island, clinical assistant professor at Brown University Medical School and a specialist in Parkinson’s Disease, argued that older drivers should develop strategies to compensate for their waning senses.

“We do not want to stop people driving (because) the ramifications are huge,” she said. “You can’t drive to medical care, shopping, social activities; in a sense, you cease being a member of society.”

Borkan agreed. “It’s not all or nothing. Starting in the late 40s, you notice (the waning of the senses) and have your eyes checked, hearing checked,” he said, noting it was a matter of knowing your limits. “You have to remember your reaction time and motor skills are slower. It’s wisdom, knowledge and knowing your limits.”

“We all age in very different ways, depending on genetics and life style choices,” said Amick, adding that as we age, “We need to start making strategies to promote self awareness.”

For example, as our vision deteriorates, night driving becomes more challenging, she said, adding that reduced peripheral vision is linked to higher risks of being in an accident. “People tend to realize their night vision has changed.” She said. “They need to adapt, develop a strategy.” One simple solution could be not to drive during night hours, a strategy many older drivers adopt.

“Limit night driving, highway driving, complicated driving,” said Borkan.

Other issues include reduced range of motion that may inhibit the ability to use mirrors effectively. Bigger mirrors may be a solution. An older driver should account for slower reaction times. “With age we all become slower,” said Amick, noting that our reaction times are fastest when we are in our 20s and then get slower and slower.”

“A more important issue is (medications) and fatigue,” Amick said. Older people tend to use more medications, and some have sedative effects. “You need to monitor that and beware of fatigue, and how much time (after taking your medication) you feel drowsy.”

At the same time, there may come a time driving is no longer safely viable. As Ott put it, “People with (early) Alzheimer’s are as dangerous as young drivers.”

“It is a difficult decision for families,” said Darlene Leyden Walsh, assistant administrator of the Rhode Island Department of Motor Vehicles. “A lot of them don’t want to be the bad guy to make the call to the DMV to ask that their parent be retested.”

Walsh said the DMV does administer a skills test to make sure older drivers are safe. But she agreed with the medical experts that, except in cases of dementia when someone may not know his or her limitations, it does not have to reach that stage right away. “One way to approach it is to say: ‘We’re concerned about your safety and the safety of others and maybe you should limit your driving a little.’ ”

She suggested not driving at night or in the rain or snow. “People should limit their times on the road to when they’re comfortable,” she said. “If they are not comfortable, something is wrong.”

And Borkan added that the decision to stop driving does not have to be the end of the world.

“Families, friends and neighbors can get more involved,” he said, noting that families tend to turn a blind eye to older relatives who are not coping well. ““It’s great, Uncle Charlie still drives to the store, they say. But one day he backs into the car behind and runs into the one in front.”

Borkan also noted the fact that it’s convenient for families for their older members to remain driving — and independent — for as long as possible. “ ‘Oh, it’s very convenient, they need to drive, they need to drive, the families say,’ ” he said.

Indeed, when the time comes for an older family member to stop driving, family members can step in and make sure they do not become isolated. “The son can drive to shopping, the daughter to senior center or church,” Borkan said, adding that other possibilities include moving to areas where they can do their shopping by walking or public transportation, or indeed to assisted living facilities or retirement villages.

“There is a time to think of it,” he said. “It’s a matter of public responsibility. You recognize it’s a great sadness (to no longer drive) but you have to know the limits. You do not send a drunk driver out on the roads. It’s a public health issue.”

“Know your limitations — everyone is different — and take more time going places,” Borkan said. “And with each passing year, know (your) limitations will get greater.”