

# Aging drivers: public safety and private mobility . . .

by Jil McIntosh

When he came back from the Great War, my grandfather bought a car. There wasn't much more to it than that; he paid his money and they gave him the keys. Driver's licenses didn't become mandatory in Ontario, where he lived, until 1927.

But they definitely were required when he was in his 80s, when a fender-bender determined to be his fault required a driving assessment, which he failed. I think the hardest day of my grandfather's life was when he was told that he could no longer get behind the wheel.

This is an issue for all drivers, especially for enthusiasts such as us, and it's going to become an even more widespread concern as the huge postwar generation reaches a critical point. The difficulties and the possible solutions were part of a symposium I attended in Toronto, Aging Driver Mobility Forum.

The forum was sponsored by the Insurance Bureau of Canada, the Ontario Ministry of Transportation, the Ontario Safety League and the Ontario Seniors' Secretariat, but the issues went beyond the province's borders, and many speakers and attendees were from across Canada and the United States.

Contrary to what you might expect, the focus was not on how to take away licenses from older drivers, but on how to keep drivers mobile for as long as possible, with total restriction only as a final step.

"We are still adults," said Jim Bradley, Ontario's Minister of Transportation, in his role as the forum's opening speaker. "Nobody wants to be told what they can and cannot do, but personal mobility must be balanced with public safety, that of the safety of the driver and of others on the road. Ultimately, we want to keep senior drivers on the road for as long as they can safely drive. Driving is a privilege, but mobility is a right."

Currently, Ontario is the strictest province when it comes to senior drivers. Upon reaching the age of eighty, a driver must pass a vision test, a road knowledge test, and attend a group education session, all on the same day. Failure to pass the tests will result in the license not being renewed. This must be done every two years in order to keep a license. Doctors are also required by law to report any medical conditions that may prevent a person from driving safely; although this applies to drivers of all age, seniors may be more likely to suffer conditions or illnesses that would be flagged in this way.

1950s and 1960s, this age group accounted for about eight percent. But in 2005, 13.1 percent of Canadians were over 65, and if current trends hold, that number should increase to 24.5 percent by 2036.

Statistics presented at the forum showed that in 2006, 13.2 percent of all licensed drivers were 65 or older – about three million drivers. Older drivers are now driving more, as well; two groups, of drivers 55 to 64 years of age, and 65 and older, were the only groups whose total number of kilometres driven increased from between 2000 and 2004.

But even though they're driving more, the numbers presented show that they're over represented in collision statistics. The collision rate for drivers between the ages of 55 and 70 years is the lowest of any age group in Canada. However, once over the age of 75, the collision rate per million kilometres driven – a per capita measurement – is similar to that of young, novice drivers.

Senior drivers also accounted for the second-largest proportion of road deaths, following the highest group, which is youth aged 15 to 24. However, a closer look reveals that senior drivers are more likely to be the fatality, especially since they tend to be frailer than teenagers; young drivers are more likely to kill a passenger inside the car, or a pedestrian or occupant of another vehicle.

When it comes to the type of crashes experienced, senior drivers are more likely to be involved in side-impact crashes, especially when turning left across traffic flow, and in crashes caused by a traffic violation, such as failure to yield the right-of-way, or disregarding traffic signals. Researchers speculate that this higher representation may partly be the result of seniors avoiding highway driving, and staying on secondary roads where they are far more likely to encounter intersections and lights.

So what can be done to keep people mobile? The forum included representatives of numerous groups, including government health and licensing bureaus, the police, the insurance industry, health care professionals, social workers and seniors' groups. The general consensus is that there isn't a single solution, but rather, a network of support, self- and third-party analysis, and new proposals to licensing – a method which could (and should) be implemented in every jurisdiction in the country.

"Our roads must be not only safe, but open to all drivers, regardless of age," said Mark Yakabuski, President and CEO of the Insurance Bureau of Canada.

censing (and) testing system that identifies medical conditions – not age, but medical conditions – when they begin to emerge. Any of us could be subject to medical conditions that prevent our ability to drive. Don't we have an obligation to detect problems more accurately? We need to test earlier, not later, to detect these and help people with the issues."

Yakabuski made several suggestions, including a graduated system of licensing, similar to that which novice drivers face in many jurisdictions – drivers with night blindness might be restricted to daytime driving only, for example, or a restriction on driving on high-speed, controlled-access highways. And those whose licenses must be fully restricted should not be left to fend for themselves, he said. "If we have to make a decision on full restriction, we have to look at the people who have to take these people places," he said. "We need to give these people more support. It's time-consuming and expensive for them, but they are providing a service."

A major part of the issue, as several speakers pointed out, is identifying the problem. I'd always thought that the "baby boomer" generation would have less difficulty hanging up the keys, since many of them had already seen it happen with their parents – parents who, because of their age and the time line of the automobile, were among the first to drive and therefore, the first to be restricted from driving.

But it seems that that isn't necessarily the case, since a number of drivers aren't necessarily able to self-analyse. When we hear "dementia", we usually think of debilitating instances such as late-stage Alzheimer's. The reality is that cognitive functions deteriorate to some extent in almost all people, with 70 per cent of those 85 and older exhibiting some form of dementia. Younger drivers may say that they'll know when to quit

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when the time comes, but the reality is that they may not be in a position to know when that day actually arrives.

So what can be done? Through panel discussions, a number of solutions came to light — and also the realization that many agencies and many people must be involved.

“We need to plan a ‘transition strategy,’” said Jennifer Kroeker-Hall, Manager of Driving Licensing Policy for the Insurance Corporation of British Columbia (ICBC). “We need an infrastructure. It’s more than just licensing and de-licensing; we want to shape a system to accommodate older drivers. That means building vehicles that can accommodate them. It means ‘walkability,’ and communities must focus on this. We need better communication before the driver is at the point beyond getting help.”

“There’s an issue of mobility transit, which doesn’t always come at convenient times, and if a seniors’ group gets a volunteer driver, it’s often another senior. Licensing bureaus can’t do this on their own. They are part of a partnership of government, of stakeholders, of the police and seniors’

groups. This is more than just licensing.”

Community action may involve better police training, so they know what to do when faced with a driver who may not be in control of a vehicle; better communication between patients and doctors, and between doctors and licensing bodies, to help identify problems in the early stages and plan appropriate action; improved methods for testing senior drivers, including not overwhelming a driver by including too many professionals in the vehicle during a road test; more options for those who cannot drive, including a convenient transit system, support for volunteer drivers, and community planning so that amenities are easily accessible even by walking; a focus on seniors in rural areas, where public transit does not exist; and easy access to information, including programs presented by seniors to seniors, where working with a peer may have more effect than a program that might be considered a lecture when presented by a younger person.

Also discussed was the importance of drivers assessing themselves, including the rule of “use it or lose it.” Not only is it important to practice driving skills, but it’s

essential that everyone in the household do so. A common scenario, according to University of Alberta researcher Dr. Bonnie Dobbs, is that women tend to let their husbands do the bulk of the driving. “A male’s life expectancy is six to seven years past the point of driving, while a female is ten years,” she said. “She needs to start preparing for the day when her husband can’t drive anymore. If he loses his ability to drive, they will still be mobile.”

Drivers need to consider their overall health, and remain active when not behind the wheel; to look objectively at such things as one’s night vision, or to realize habits that may be detrimental to safe driving, such as not judging traffic properly; and to be willing to discuss potential problems with the doctor.

Of course, no one wants to admit difficulties to a doctor if that is going to result in immediate license seizure, and that’s why this needs to be an all-encompassing plan that takes every aspect of public safety and private mobility into consideration. This is where associations such as seniors’ groups, church congregations and community groups need to be involved. And it doesn’t just mean seniors fighting for their rights; we’re all getting older by the minute, and even younger drivers need to think about issues that will come into play in future, whether

it’s graduated licensing, better transit routes, or even whether the big-box store planned for the corner should be more accessible to foot traffic.

“We know that the best driving comes from experience,” Mark Yakabuski said. “We need innovative solutions. We need to support the people who have given to our country, and our country must give back to them.”