



North Shore News Column.

Older & Wiser

By Tom Carney

Don't discriminate against aging drivers

Research shows seniors get a bad rap

By Tom Carney, North Shore News June 24, 2012

LOOKING to fire up the conversation around the barbecue this summer?

Try talking with your friends about senior drivers.

Drivers who are 80 and above are the fastest growing segment of the driving population.

There are currently approximately three million senior drivers in Canada and their numbers are expected to double by 2040. Sadly, road trauma is a serious cause of death and disability in seniors throughout Canada, amounting to about one death per day amongst individuals over the age of 65.

I think older drivers get a bad rap. Jokes abound about senior drivers and the inference is that older drivers are a menace not just to themselves but to others and the sooner we can get them off the road the better.

My readers are having none of it. And neither is Ezra Hauer, a professor emeritus in the department of civil engineering at the University of Toronto. Hauer, aged 80, has been studying the issue of older drivers for decades and says there is no reason to single out older drivers for special treatment or restrictions when it comes to driving privileges.

Research shows that the only groups of people that have more than 10 crashes for every million miles they drive are people aged 16-19 and 82 and above. Middleaged drivers, those in their 30s, 40s and 50s, tend to have half as many accidents.

When you look at fatalities it's a whole different story, with older drivers suffering five, six and seven times as much as their middle-aged counterparts.

Isn't that reason enough to get tough on senior drivers? No, says Hauer.

The higher fatality figures are due not so much to worse driving but rather to the fact that older people are more likely to die in a crash because they are more frail than the rest of the population. Seniors also tend to do most of their driving closer to home rather than on safer freeways, which skews their number of crashes per mile higher.

Seniors as a group and as a rule are not using their vehicles to commit a crime, nor are they speeding or driv-

ing while intoxicated. When seniors get behind the wheel they are, as Hauer so aptly puts it, mostly a danger to themselves.

Hauer concludes that when you normalize the driving patterns of nonseniors to those of seniors, older drivers have a somewhat higher accident rate, but not dramatically higher.

The Canadian Association of Retired Persons is one of several groups warning against taking an ageist attitude toward the rights of older Canadians to keep on driving.

Study after study has shown that the privilege to keep driving is crucial to the independence and mobility of people, especially as they age, and is an important element to their quality of life.

Now clearly there are some seniors who should not be driving and we need to deal with them.

Seniors who are concerned about the government acting arbitrarily or unfairly targeting them as a group can help themselves by supporting initiatives like driver retraining, enrolling in defensive driving courses and helping health-care professionals to develop some new guidelines for measuring physical and cognitive impairment that would lead to a person knowing when it's time to give up their driving privileges.

But as Hauer has ably demonstrated, not all older drivers are bad drivers.

Here's the bottom line: Driving is a privilege not a right. But the privilege to drive should be based on ability rather than age.

Tom Carney is the executive director of the Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. Ideas for future columns are welcome. Contact him at 604-985-3852 or send an email to lions_view@telus.net.