



North Shore News Column.

Older & Wiser

By Tom Carney

Driver rules should be based on ability, not age

MY last column on senior drivers prompted a flood of calls to our office

By Tom Carney, Special to North Shore News July 9, 2012

The majority of the callers felt that all seniors are tarred with the same brush and many are worried that the government is planning a crackdown on older drivers.

Sandy was typical of the group of callers I heard from. Sandy is an entrepreneur, "well past" the age of 65, and has a perfect driving record. He thinks the "problem drivers" aren't seniors but teenage drivers and those in their early 20s.

Sandy's on the right track here - those in the 15-to 25-year-old age group account for the largest proportion of road deaths. But drivers aged 65 and older are close behind and the fatality rate for drivers aged 80 and older is 1.5 times higher than that of teenagers.

But as I noted in my previous column, seniors die in fatal crashes not because they are bad drivers but because they are more frail.

Canadians are only moderately concerned about elderly drivers as a safety issue if some measures are put in place to support elderly drivers. In a poll conducted by the Traffic Injury Research Foundation, three quarters of Canadians wanted elderly drivers to complete training courses to maintain their driving privileges starting at age 70, and 70 per cent of Canadians felt that seniors with driving difficulties should be limited to driving within a 25-kilometre radius of their home. In that same poll the majority of Canadians did not want to see elderly drivers stripped of their driving privileges if they caused a collision. Overall, Canadians don't believe elderly drivers should turn in their keys at a certain age.

There is one exception. The Canadian Medical Association is calling for a graduated licensing system for seniors similar to the program currently in place for young and new drivers. The CMA is suggesting a full driver's licence should automatically default to a restricted licence once a senior reaches a certain age which is yet to be determined.

I can see where the CMA is coming from here - this new proposal re-frames the interaction between a senior and his or her doctor by placing the physician in the positive position of endorsing a full driver's licence rather than taking away privileges.

The CMA cites a Transport Canada report which notes that 389 of the 2,209 Canadians who died in vehicle accidents were over the age of 65. In their editorial, the CMA notes that that represents "a higher incidence than any other age group and far higher than those half their age."

Now I have a couple of problems with the CMA's position on this issue. The report cited by the CMA tells us that the vast majority of those who died in vehicle accidents (1,820) were under, not over, the age of 65. I support a graduated licensing program for young drivers because at the time the program was introduced the fatality stats for this age group were simply horrific. That's not the case with seniors. And there is simply no evidence that I can find to suggest that seniors are responsible for causing a rash of accidents on our roadways.

I think the CMA has got it wrong here. Granted, there are some senior drivers who should not be behind the wheel and we need to find a better way to deal with them. But elderly drivers should not be excluded or have restrictions placed on their driving just because they are older. That notion is discriminatory and insulting.

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.