

## **Educating Seniors: Bring Your Health... Home**

A Monthly Column by Kimberly Harmon RN, BSN

### **You, Your Car and Your Driving: A Healthy or Unhealthy Relationship?**

Seven people were recently injured in Plymouth after a car driven by a 73-year-old woman jumped a curb and plowed into a crowd gathered at a war memorial... On June 2 in Danvers, a 93-year-old man drove his car into the entrance of a Wal-Mart, injuring six people, after mistaking the gas pedal for the brake... On June 13, an 88-year-old struck a young girl as she used a crosswalk with her grandfather.

Lately it seems like senior drivers in Massachusetts are hitting everything except the lottery.

Many seniors I know fight hard to stay behind the wheel. Driving gives them a sense of independence: They can go where they want, when they want, without having to rely on others. Some seniors already feel like they're a burden to their friends and family, and they don't want to place an additional inconvenience on them, even if told it won't be any trouble.

But as more seniors cling to the independence that cars give them, they're increasingly losing their ability to operate those vehicles and causing more accidents. Many of these accidents are fatal.

In fact, road safety analysts predict that by 2030, when all baby boomers are at least 65, they will be responsible for 25% of all fatal crashes. By comparison, in 2005, 11% of fatal crashes involved drivers that old. As you often get in this column, you'll now read some startling statistics (from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, unless otherwise noted):

- About 10% of all drivers in the U.S. today are 70 or older - a rise of nearly 36% over the last decade. By 2020 there will be 40 million senior drivers (65+) on the road.
- In 2007, 79 percent of traffic fatalities involving older drivers happened during the day. Seventy-one percent involved another vehicle.

Of course, we don't to repeat the litany of studies that reveal our vision, hearing, motor-reaction time and some cognitive abilities decline with age. We know it personally. What's important to emphasize here is that all of these contribute to poor driving—especially failing vision and slower reaction times.

Across the country, 19 states require older drivers (65 or 70) to renew their licenses in person, to renew them more often or to pass road and vision tests, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS). Some groups object to these age-based steps saying that they are age-biased. They also contend that computer based testing is intimidating to seniors who have not grown up in a computer age.

Those are legitimate objections and I won't argue them in this column. I will only say that there are options: Transportation services for seniors, escort services, etc. Our clients find these options to be safer, more reliable and—most importantly—far less stressful (after all, who wants to drive regularly on the Mass Pike?)

With the recent media focus on this issue, we're increasingly aware of the results of the studies that share why and how seniors are involved in accidents. What I haven't heard in the breathless news reports is how seniors are self-limiting their driving.

The IIHS reports that older adults increasingly self-limit driving as they age and develop physical and cognitive impairments. The oldest drivers—age 80 and up—were more than twice as likely than 65-69 year old drivers to report that they limited their time behind the wheel by avoiding night and interstate highway driving, driving less frequently, driving shorter distances and not driving in snow or on ice.

There's a limit to self-limitation. And even though you may not want to take away the privilege of driving from your loved one, you'll have to help your loved one to understand that driving is no longer safe. Here are some ways you can try to do so:

- **Gather support:** The more people you can get to join in your discussion with your loved one, the more power you'll have in talking to him or her.
- **Encourage a physical exam:** A physical exam will help you and your family member or friend know for sure if there's any issue that may interfere with operating a vehicle.
- **Use statistics:** Sometimes the shock of statistics can help your loved one see the dangers of driving (at any age!), especially when it isn't always the older person who causes the accident but someone else.
- **Offer to drive/hire an escort:** Your friend or family member may accept a ride somewhere if offered. Try to find out what the person's schedule is and ask if he or she would like a ride to and from the appointment. Or, hire an escort and "leave the driving to us."

Remember, the essence of home health care is to provide individuals, families and loved ones with services that promote maximum comfort and independence in the home.

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