

(1)

Senior Drivers: Hazards on the Road? by Alistair Hensler, Ottawa

My father was slowly navigating his car into the garage when the vehicle suddenly shot forward and slammed into the interior wall. The car and garage were damaged minimally and he was not injured; nevertheless, he decided never to drive again.

Many readers will immediately conclude that my father made the right decision because seniors should not be driving on our streets and highways. That is an ageist attitude that permeates Canadian society. Every time a senior driver is involved in an accident, the collective loud sigh of "I told you so" is clearly audible. Seldom is there a concession that perhaps, just perhaps, the other party was at fault or mechanical failure was a contributing factor to the accident. How many millions of automobiles have been recalled this year for technical problems? No, the senior is presumed to be at fault based solely on age no matter the circumstances.

This ageist attitude about senior drivers persists despite a growing body of research and reports to the contrary. In 2001 the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published a comprehensive study dealing with ageing and transport. A key issue of that study was the finding that "older drivers tend to be safer than is commonly believed (and) they have fewer reported crashes per capita or per number of drivers" in the OECD member countries. The study also found that the targeting of senior drivers with mandatory age-based testing, a practice widely used in Canada, appears to be ineffective. In the United States earlier this year the independent, non-profit Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) reversed a previous negative assessment of senior drivers. The IIHS had declared that accident levels would increase commensurate with the growing number of senior drivers. That prediction was reversed after a study of collision claims based on age. The study confirmed that the frequency of collision claims was highest among drivers aged 15-19 and steadily declined for older age groups with 60-64 being the lowest. The frequency of claims rose for drivers age 65 and above but never approached the level of teenage drivers. IIHS attributed the declining statistics to safer vehicles and healthier seniors, both of which apply to Canada.

Canada seems slow off the mark to recognize that senior drivers are no more threats on the road than any other age group and indeed in most cases are less so. Opposition to age-targeted testing is growing in British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario and some medical and academic professions have been vocal in their opposition. Professor Michel Bedard, Director of Lakehead University's Centre for Research on Safe Driving, has reportedly argued earlier this year that the imposition of testing of seniors in some provincial jurisdictions is based on

(2)

unfounded information. “When you look at the statistics, senior drivers pose no greater threat – there is no alarming trend”, he is quoted as declaring.

The Ontario Road Safety Annual Reports (ORSAR) support Professor Bedard’s views. For example, in 2009 the province experienced 277 deaths among drivers of all ages. For the age group 21 to 34 the total fatalities were 83 and for ages 65 to 75+ the number was 51. All other ages accounted for 143. The numbers are similar for 2010 when the age group 21 to 34 accounted for 74 deaths of drivers while the 65 to 75+ group experienced 59 fatalities. The remaining 166 were attributed to all other drivers.

The ORSAR also recorded a downward trend in fatalities age 80 and above. In the five year period between 2006 and 2010 the average fatal collision involvement rate per 10,000 licenced drivers in that age group was 48 percent lower than the average fatal collision rate between 1991 and 1995. The Ministry of Transport Ontario (MTO) cites these stats to demonstrate the success of the age-related testing and to justify its continuation. Translating the percentage into real numbers finds that in the period 2006 to 2010 the average fatal collision rate for drivers age 80 and above was 1.67 (fatalities) per 10,000 licenced drivers.

The costs associated with age-targeted testing are not insignificant. For Ontario during the three calendar years 2011, 2012 and 2013, 354,531 drivers age 80 and above attended education sessions presented by MTO staff. Of that total 9,612 (or 2.7%) were referred for road testing. The total wages, costs and expenses for operating and managing the program for those three years was \$5,363,432. Unfortunately, the reasons for the referrals are not known – they could have been for poor vision, multi accidents or significant numbers of traffic infractions -- nor are the results and additional costs associated with the road tests. There is, however, one certainty. Seniors ages 65 and above represent the fastest growing age group which by 2031 will constitute 22.8 percent of the Canadian population and the majority will be residing in Ontario. So, whatever the current total costs for administering this program, they will increase substantially in the coming decades which should concern any fiscally responsible government.

Why, in the face of the statistical evidence and studies, is Ontario continuing to demand testing of all senior drivers ages 80 and over. Even some automobile insurance companies offer discounts to seniors in recognition of their safe driving. But, governments are perpetuating the myth that senior drivers represent potential hazards on the roads. Not only does the testing represent age discrimination, it fails to recognize that some senior drivers have had no at-fault accidents and no serious traffic violations. Earlier this year MTO did change the testing to what was promoted as “a shorter, simpler renewal program”. The previous testing involved a

(3)

lecture on the rules of the road followed by a written exam, a vision test and a review of driving records. The lecture and exam have been replaced by two tasks that test the cognitive capabilities of the seniors which some medical experts claim is a test for dementia. Nevertheless, dismissing the knowledge test and replacing it with a quasi-medical test has not dealt with principal issue: the testing remains a discriminatory age-targeted process.

Any age-related testing should be eliminated. The statistics do not justify the continuation of the program. The resources now expended on the testing could be better used to vigorously target all drivers who have experienced multi accidents, committed serious traffic offences, amassed demerit points and generally exhibited poor driving habits. In addition medical doctors, who are now obliged to report to MTO patients who are incapable of driving for any reason, should be provided with clear guidelines for both withdrawal and re-instatement of drivers' licences. And vision, for which only seniors age 80 and above are currently tested, should be a compulsory test for all drivers on the initial issue and renewal of licences.

As the fastest growing age group, seniors represent a potential potent political force. They need to exercise that force in opposition to this discriminatory age-targeted testing.

As for the accident involving my father, who was a World War One veteran and was awarded a Military Medal for heroism at Vimy Ridge, he was in his thirties when he decided not to drive again following the run-in with the garage. He was not a senior as some ageist readers may have erroneously concluded.