



Elder Law: When it's time to quit the driver's seat

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By Julian Gray and Frank Petrich /

Have your kids ever come home and said, "Mom, Grandma ran another red light today."

Hopefully not; but as we age, our ability to operate a vehicle safely can decrease. In counseling families with elderly parents still driving, inevitably the question arises as to whether safety is a concern. This issue has many considerations: safety for the driver and passengers, safety for other people outside the vehicle and potential property damage and liability.

So, while having the conversation with an elderly driver who may not have the best driving ability anymore is always a touchy subject, there's a lot more than just the dignity of the driver at stake. (Yes, there are many elderly drivers who are probably better drivers than many of us, but these aren't usually the ones family members are concerned about.) Statistics show that older adults are more likely to receive traffic citations and get into accidents than younger drivers. In fact, fatal crash rates rise sharply after a driver has reached the age of 70.

Pennsylvania, like most states, does not have a mandatory age requirement to retest drivers. In fact, our state has a "lottery" system where each month 1,650 randomly chosen drivers age 45 and over who are renewing a license are asked to take a vision and medical exam. Based on the results of these tests, the driver may have to pass a road test. However, this system is random and represents only a very small percentage of the actual licensed drivers.

So, how can we help drivers who may exhibit the warning signs?

The aging process takes a toll on the driver's physical abilities and reaction times. Drivers who have stiff necks may find it difficult to change lanes or have a complete field of vision at intersections. Leg pains can diminish the ability to apply the gas and brake pedals. Arm strength is needed to turn the steering wheel effectively and quickly in some circumstances. And let's face it, there is just a lot more "stuff" out there to pay attention to these days: digital billboards, numerous types of road signs and signals, and -- of course -- other aggressive drivers.

Anton Uhl, a volunteer counselor for the AARP Driver Safety Program, puts it this way: "Most of our elderly drivers learned how to drive 50 years ago." A lot has changed since then. Even cars themselves are now technologically "loaded" to the point where just finding out how to start the car can be challenging.

A car for many older adults is their primary evidence of continued independence. Older drivers who wish to remain independent should consider being proactive with their health to avoid

accidents. This means getting your eyes and hearing checked annually. Also, consult with your physician on the medications you are taking as well as your physical condition to ascertain any concerns to operate a vehicle safely. And, while most people think getting plenty of rest is easy when you're retired, it is especially important for older drivers to get a good night's sleep, especially when planning an extended drive the next day.

There are other smart habits and choices to consider such as choosing an appropriate vehicle for your situation. Grandma may be safer (for her) driving a Hummer, but it may not be the easiest vehicle to maneuver. And the souped-up convertible for granddad might not be the wisest choice either. Night driving also can be challenging for anyone with certain eye ailments, so plan on making trips during daylight hours. And, of course, listen to the concerns of others who may notice changes in your driving habits.

So, how do we approach the "talk" about when it might be the right time to give up the keys? Many concerned family members assume that "if I take Dad's keys away, it will devastate him." While it is true there is a certain level of dignity and independence that comes with being able to go wherever you want in a car, there is also a more practical issue. As Mr. Uhl says, "There are simply not sufficient public transportation systems available to the elderly to promote independence without a car."

So, while some seniors really don't enjoy driving anymore, they don't have many options to get around when they want to and on their schedules. While there are transportation services available, frequently the time frames for pickup can vary and it is difficult for a senior using public transit to maintain a timely arrival for a scheduled doctor's appointment. Moreover, while adult children are usually willing to pitch in with a ride now and then (if they even live near their parents), most parents do not want to be seen as a burden to them.

Consulting an occupational therapist to evaluate the driver's ability to safely operating a vehicle or the possibility of vehicle modifications is one option to consider. In extreme situations involving imminent danger, the driver's physician can report the concerns to the authorities who can investigate the situation to prevent a catastrophe. But many physicians are unwilling to play bad cop in these situations.

When approaching the conversation with a family member, it is important to remain respectful and help the driver find alternatives to operating a vehicle. Another reason to remember the old "Hill Street Blues" adage: "Be careful out there!"

Julian Gray and Frank Petrich are both certified elder law attorneys with over 55 years of combined elder law experience who practice in the Pittsburgh area at Gray Elder Law. Send questions for consideration in this column to elderlawguys@grayelderlaw.com, and visit their website at www.grayelderlaw.com.

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