

Why isn't it harder for elderly to get drivers' licenses?

Posted: March 31st, 2013 – 6:08 a.m.

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THE WASHINGTON POST



James and Edie Chouinard of Auburn escaped serious injury June 29 when a wrong-way driver on I-95 in Portland was stopped by Maine State Police Trooper Douglas Cropper parking his cruiser across the highway. The elderly driver crashed into the trooper's vehicle instead of crashing head-on into the Chouinards' car.

The Washington Post and other media in the Washington region frequently report auto accidents involving elderly drivers. There was another one Tuesday in which three people standing near a bus stop were hurt — one seriously — when a 79-year-old woman lost control of her car, which jumped a curb in Northeast Washington. Such sad stories remind me that I have two milestones approaching: I'm about to turn 78, and my driver's license is about to expire.

Not to worry: Maryland's Motor Vehicles Administration has already sent me the necessary forms for renewing my license by mail. All I need is a note from my friendly ophthalmologist saying that my eyesight is OK, and I'll get a license good for eight years.

Think about that. Eight years. I don't have to show up at an MVA office. I don't have to undergo a physical or mental exam, much less a driving test. And I'll be good to go until age 86.

According to the Alzheimer's Association, nearly half of people older than 85 have Alzheimer's disease. I finish The Post's Sunday crossword each week (OK, my wife helps), so I suppose I'm not seriously cognitively impaired yet. But what about eight years from now? My ophthalmologist says that my eyesight is good now, but I'll likely need cataract surgery in less than eight years. I play tennis several times a week, and my reaction time seems fine to me, but it is surely slowing. Just ask my partners.

I certainly hope I'll still be fit to drive eight years from now. But the Maryland MVA doesn't even know if I'm fit now. It clearly can't know whether I will be in 2021.

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety reports that 19 states restrict the issuance of driver's licenses to folks my age — some by requiring more frequent renewals, some by test requirements, some by both. Unfortunately, neither Maryland nor Virginia does so. In the District of Columbia, to get an eight-year renewal after age 70, applicants must get a doctor's statement saying that they are mentally and physically competent to drive. Eight years is still risky, in my view.

It wouldn't be much of a hardship for me to visit an MVA office every two years or so to get a new license, even if the prospect of a test forced me to study the rule book again or I had to demonstrate anew my considerable skills at parallel parking. But that's not required. Why not?

The next time an elderly driver speeds the wrong way on a divided highway, drives into a store-front barber shop or runs down pedestrians on a sidewalk, stop and think. He or she may have years left on that license.

Source: <http://bangordailynews.com/2013/03/31/health/why-isnt-it-harder-for-elderly-to-get-drivers-licenses/>