

Senior drivers more dangerous, says U of A doc

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To some aging seniors who hope to continue driving, Dr. Louis Francescutti is the bad guy.

He's had patients insist they are OK to drive as long as they are with their partner or spouse because they act like their eyes and ears, while others develop dementia or Alzheimer's disease that slowly creeps up without them realizing.

Whatever the scenario, Francescutti said taking away someone's ability to drive is never an easy job, especially when it comes to those who live in rural areas and depend on a vehicle to get by.

"You want to try and make it as objective as possible. There are certain situations, however, it's a no brainer," said Francescutti, an emergency physician and University of Alberta professor with the school of public health.

"I'm not saying just because you're old you can't drive, but the majority of the old folks really shouldn't be driving."

According to statistics recently released by Alberta Transportation, there are 1,831 men and 1,157 women in Alberta that are 90 years and older who have their Class 5 driver's license.

A further 18 men and two women 90 years and older have both their Class 5 and 6 licenses, the latter of which allows them to operate a motorcycle or moped. Last February, the oldest driver registered in Alberta was 103.

In order to help doctors determine whether an elderly patient is fit to drive, the Canadian Medical Association has released a guide on driver fitness.

Once a driver hits age 75 in Alberta, they have to undergo a medical and get a form from their doctor, recommending renewal of their license. After the age 80, it becomes a bi-annual process.

The medical test looks at key areas such as vision, hearing, cognitive abilities and overall health. A road test may be recommended by the doctor or Alberta Transportation to help further determine a senior's ability to drive safely.

During his years as a physician, Francescutti has heard some horror stories when it comes to seniors behind the wheel. He remembers an elderly woman came in from out of town and crashed at an intersection. Her family said there were no traffic lights where she lives, so he should cut her some slack.

"I told them I am going to have to report her, they are going to have to take the license away. Then all of a sudden I become the bad guy," said Francescutti, who believes it's time to start introducing graduated licensing for seniors that would place limitations on driving at certain times on certain roads.

On a per mile driven basis, he said older drivers are more dangerous than young drivers.

“If we’re going to take their license away then we better be prepared as a society to offer alternative ways to get around. It’s a conversation we really should be having now as the baby boomers start getting older.”

Complaints regarding drivers who are at risk to the public can be reported to the province’s driver and fitness monitoring branch. The registrar has the authority to require a driver to submit a medical or physical examination and may place conditions or restrictions on a license or suspend driving privileges if there is grounds to believe that the person is a safety risk to himself or the public.

— **PAMELA ROTH, Sun Media News Services**

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