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Too old to drive - How to convince older drivers to give up their keys?

Families may have to watch for dents in the car and plead with an older driver to give up the keys—but there is new evidence that doctors could have more of an influence on one of the most wrenching decisions facing a rapidly aging population. A large study from Canada found that when doctors warn patients, and tell driving authorities, that the older folks may be medically unfit to be on the road, there is a drop in serious crash injuries among those drivers. The study couldn't tell if the improvement was because those patients drove less, or drove more carefully once the doctors pointed out the risk. But as the number of older drivers surges, it raises the question of how families and doctors could be working together to determine if and when age-related health problems are bad enough to impair driving.

Often, families are making that tough choice between safety and independence on their own. “It’s very scary,” said Pat Sneller who talked her husband, Lee, into quitting about a year after he was diagnosed with early-stage Alzheimer’s disease. The couple had recently moved from California, one of the few U.S. states that require doctors to report drivers with worrisome health conditions to licensing authorities. Texas does not require doctor involvement, and health workers advised her judge her husband’s abilities for herself.

Eventually her husband called home in a panic, lost while driving in Dallas for volunteer work. A long scrape on the car that he could not explain was the final straw. In 2010, she persuaded him to quit driving, although the 72-year-old’s license remains good until 2014.

About 600,000 older drivers a year quit because of health conditions but there are no clear guidelines to decide who should quit. The lack of transport options in America means that quitting driving can cause real independence problems for some people.

“It did not go over so well,” Benjamin Benson recalls of the time when his sons told the 87-year-old they feared his reflexes had slowed too much for safe driving. The retired accountant was not ready to quit then, but he quietly began to analyze what would happen to him and his wife, who does not drive, if he did. His longtime doctor would not advise one way or the other. So over a few months, the couple tried online grocery shopping. They took a taxi to the dentist. But Benson calculated that maintaining and insuring the car was expensive,

too, when he drove only 4,800km a year. Benson surprised his family by giving away the car, and he says he's faring fine so far. "Most people in our age group know that it's inevitable and think about when. I didn't want to be pushed into it."

Doctors in Canada are supposed to report to licensing authorities patients with certain health conditions that may impair driving. Patients who received warnings from doctors had 45% fewer crashes after receiving the warnings. But the study also highlighted a reason physicians don't like to get involved: About 20% of the patients who were warned changed doctors.

The AMA recommends that doctors administer simple tests to advise older drivers:

- Walk 10 feet down the hallway, turn around and come back. Taking longer than 9 seconds is linked to driving problems.
- On a page with the letters A to L and the numbers 1 to 13 randomly arranged, see how quickly and accurately you draw a line from 1 to A, then to 2, then to B and so on. This so-called trail-making test measures memory, spatial processing and other brain skills.
- Check if people can turn their necks to change lanes, and can slam on brakes.

Dr Gary Kennedy, geriatric psychiatry chief at New York's Montefiore Medical Center, often adds another question: Are his patients allowed to drive their grandchildren? "If the answer to that is no, the people who know the patient best think they're not safe".

Questions

1. How does the situation in Japan compare to America and Canada?
2. In Japan, are doctors required to tell licensing authorities if patients are unsafe to drive?
3. Do you think there should be an age limit for driving? Why? How old? Why not?
4. Have you had to deal with this situation, either for yourself or for a relative?
5. Have you every stopped doing something because of age?
6. As you get older, do you think you will make a good decision about when to stop driving? How will you know when it's time to stop?
7. How do you think you would react if your doctor advised you to stop driving? Would you prefer to receive this advise from a doctor or a family member?

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