

The Review of the Older Driver Licensing System By DIER

Response by Council on the Ageing (COTA (Tas))

October 2010

Background

COTA welcomes this DIER review of the licensing system for older drivers.

The health and wellbeing of older people depends to a large degree on the extent to which they can maintain effective levels of social, physical and mental activity. Participation in community activities and the maintenance of family and other relationships has a dominant impact on the health of people as they age. COTA knows the impact for many older people who must surrender their licence: it heralds the onset of dependence, vulnerability and loss of autonomy.

COTA's key position

COTA supports DIER's option to cease mandatory on-road driving assessments for drivers aged 85 years and over and that drivers aged 85 years and over should only be required to undergo an on road assessment for the same reasons that any other driver would be assessed (p.13).

COTA however is concerned that DIER is not also considering ceasing the mandatory annual medical assessment. COTA does not support DIER's statement in Improvements of Medical Assessment that there is "a continuation of the existing policy to mandate annual medicals from the age of 75 years" (p.14).

Based on the evidence outlined in DIER's own discussion paper that "there is no evidence that older drivers are more likely to cause a crash" (p.5) and the fact that mandating medical assessments based on age is age discriminatory, COTA is opposed to mandatory age based medical assessments.

COTA acknowledges that abolishing both on road driving assessments and medical assessments for older drivers may not be received well by the public given the public perception that older drivers are involved in more accidents. COTA also acknowledges that abolishing these assessments may not be politically well received. Given these potential scenarios, COTA recommends that DIER and COTA form a partnership to conduct a public education campaign to dispel the incorrect perception that older drivers are a risk.

COTA National Policy position on older drivers

COTA (Tas) is part of a broader federation of COTAs throughout Australia and is a member of COTA National. The COTA National Policy Compendium, endorsed by COTA all states and territories, outlines the following in relation to older drivers:

Over the next 30 years greater numbers of those aged 65+ will have driven all their adult lives and will see their dependence on motor vehicles as an integral part of their lifestyle. In our private car oriented society driving is an important mobility option for many older people (often the most convenient secure and comfortable mode of transport) and there are considerable benefits to enabling older people to keep driving if they are fit to do so.

Driving should be seen in the broader context of mobility issues for older people which include the transition to non-driving status, accessibility to public transport, innovative community transport options and other aids to personal mobility and independence including mobility scooters.

A number of myths about the safety of, and risks posed by, older drivers have proliferated based on ageist attitudes and misuse of statistics. COTA National holds concerns about the impact of negative attitudes, use of statistics and regulations that are detrimental to older people maintaining their independence as drivers.

Most States and Territories have some form of mandatory re-testing for driving licences, linked to age or medical assessment. Yet there is no evidence to support the assumption that mandatory testing should result in better road safety for older drivers. In fact a growing body of research shows no safety or mobility benefits for age based mandatory testing. In addition, there is no evidence to show that age is an effective basis for predicting ability to drive. These re-assessment procedures are a daunting and stressful experience for older drivers with research showing many drivers, especially women, choosing to stop driving rather, than undertake reassessment. These systems may unnecessarily compromise the mobility of those who may not need to stop driving.

The State of Victoria has no compulsory license re-testing based on aged and older drivers are not treated differently from others when it comes to renewal or assessment for driving. The effectiveness of the different licensing systems in Australia has been examined by two studies which have compared the casualty crash rates for older drivers across the different jurisdictions. The first study was conducted in the mid 1980s and compared drivers aged 75 years and older. It was found that despite its lack of mandatory assessment program, Victoria has amongst the lowest per-population older driver crash rates and the lowest older driver crash rate per number of licences issued.

An update of this study also failed to show any safety benefits for mandatory assessment programs in Australia. Older drivers (aged 80 years and above) in jurisdictions with age based mandatory assessment programs could not be shown to be safer than drivers in Victoria, whereas older drivers in Victoria had significantly reduced per-driver involvement in serious casualty crashes.

Screening tests have been developed and are used in some State and Territories to determine whether or not an individual is fit to drive, or who may be an increased risk of being involved in an accident. However the assessment procedures used by licensing authorities have not been validated. It is not known therefore whether it can discriminate between people who are likely or unlikely to be safe drivers. The fact that Victorian outcomes are indistinguishable from interstate comparisons suggests that the testing procedures in other States may not be effective in discriminating good from bad drivers.

In addition, the tendency to self-regulation, combined with a process of referral and testing, is resulting in crash rate outcomes in Victoria that are equal or better to those in other States.

COTA Australia notes:

-In 1998 drivers 65+ represented around 8 % of all drivers killed on our roads.

This compares with around 25% of fatalities in the 18-25 age group.

-Older drivers compare favourably on the basis of accidents per capita and per driver's licence, but statistics are often cited in which the fatality rate is adjusted for distance travelled (older people travel shorter distances than younger drivers). This results in the incidence of accidents for older drivers appearing to increase steeply from 70 years.

-An OECD report found that "Older drivers do not present a special threat to other road users. Older drivers were involved in a smaller number of accidents resulting in the death of other motor vehicle occupants or pedestrians than other age groups."

-The discussion about risk and older drivers is made more difficult to interpret because of the frailty factor. Older people are more likely to be injured or killed in an accident, because older people are more prone to severe, injury in a crash, thus boosting the statistics for road deaths (not the number of crashes). (*COTA Australia Policy Compendium, June 2010, National Policy Office*)

Comments on the options in the DIER Discussion Paper

On Road Assessments

Option 1.1 – COTA does not support.

Option 1.2 – COTA supports.

Medical Assessment Process

Option 2.1 – COTA does not support. Mandatory medical assessment at age 75 years is age discriminatory as it is based purely on age and no other factor. As DIER states "there is no evidence that older drivers are more likely to cause a crash" and hence there should be no requirement to have an assessment at a certain age.

Option 2.2 – COTA supports. People aged 75 years and above are eligible for a comprehensive medical assessment by a GP. Whilst not all older people undergo this assessment, it is covered by Medicare and it would most likely alert the GP to any medical concerns that could impact on the older person's ability to drive.

Option 2.3 – COTA does not support.

Option 2.4 – COTA does not support. COTA can see no benefit of such a group. The RMV can well judge the validity of advice from a GP, relative, carer or the police.

Option 2.5 – COTA does not support if it were compulsory. COTA would support an optional assessment by an OTDA, however this would need to be subsidised as the cost would be prohibited for the majority of older people.

Option 2.6 – COTA does not support mandatory medical assessments.

Improved Communication

Option 3.1 and 3.2 – COTA supports the development and implementation of an educational and training course to assist older drivers, provided it is not compulsory. COTA also supports the development of educational materials.

An educational program has been available through DIER based on the older driver's safety handbook, developed by DIER over 10 years ago. This safety handbook was complimented by an information session to older people on driver safety, delivered by older people as peer educators. COTA would welcome the reintroduction of this initiative. COTA has trained peer educators who deliver presentations to older people's groups on a range of health and wellbeing issues and could easily be trained to include presentations on driving.

In addition, COTA suggests DIER produce material with information on alternative transport options to older drivers who are going through the transition of giving up their license. Such information could include contacts for Community Transport Services Tasmania, Metro bus timetables and costs of bus services, transport discounts available to seniors, etc. The Department of Transport in Western Australia produce such information and can be viewed at [http://www.dpi.wa.gov.au/mediaFiles/LBU_DL_FS_TransportAlternativeMetro_\(2\).pdf](http://www.dpi.wa.gov.au/mediaFiles/LBU_DL_FS_TransportAlternativeMetro_(2).pdf)

Additional comments and recommendations

The COTA Australia Policy Compendium recommends:

1. All Governments
 - a) Adopt a licence re-assessment procedure that is based on:
 - community referral of those considered 'at risk' by doctors, pharmacists, community workers, etc
 - licence outcomes that include:-
 - Awareness training
 - Retraining and rehabilitation
 - Offering alternatives
 - Restricted licenses
 - b) Support, and continue to fund, research to find a reliable assessment tool which will discriminate accurately between older people who should, and should not, drive. However, this should not become part of a mandatory testing program but should remain part of a voluntary/community reporting model;

- c) Support the transition to non-driving status through information, access and availability of appropriate public and community transport options.
 - d) Support age-friendly, and nationally consistent, road design standards related to clear signage, line markings, parking provision etc.
2. State Governments take a cross-portfolio approach to planning for the future mobility and safety needs of people in both urban and country areas, to cover all transportation and road use areas – community transport, subsidised taxi services, public transport, private car use, and including motorised mobility aids. (*COTA Australia Policy Compendium, June 2010, National Policy Office*)

Summary

COTA's key points are summarised as follows:

1. COTA welcomes DIER's review of the older drivers licensing system and appreciates the opportunity for input.
2. COTA does not support mandatory age based driver testing either on road or medical.
3. COTA recognises that abolishing both assessments may not be well received politically or by the public. COTA therefore recommends DIER partners with COTA to conduct a public education campaign to dispel the incorrect perception that older drivers are a risk.
4. COTA encourages DIER to consider the issue of older drivers in the broader context of older people's transport needs, including the transition to non-driver status through information, access and availability of appropriate public and community transport options.
5. COTA emphasises the fact that Tasmania has the fastest growing older population in Australia and that DIER could take the lead in Australia in responding effectively to the needs and interests of older drivers and to the broader transport needs of older Tasmanians.

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