

Assessing fitness to drive systems: opinions of experienced occupational therapy driver assessors

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Introduction:

Health, disability or ageing-related factors may impact upon an individual's ability to maintain driving independence and licensure. To address these concerns, some Australian jurisdictions have medical review systems which include procedures for competency testing. Occupational therapy driver assessors (OTDAs) identify and assess medically "at risk" drivers as part of these systems (Di Stefano & Macdonald, 2010). Licensing authority strategies to optimise management of these drivers includes regular system review and stakeholder consultation.

Methods:

A state-wide survey of OTDAs providing services to at-risk drivers was conducted in Victoria. Details and opinions about OTDA practice, the characteristics of drivers evaluated, assessment methods, target groups to prioritise for stakeholder engagement and educational interventions were sought. An on-line questionnaire was used to collect data. All OTDAs on the licensing authority database were invited to participate.

Results:

Fifty eight OTDAs responded, representing a reply rate of between 65 – 77% for individual survey items. The majority of OTDAs had 5 or more years of experience and work in either private practice or rehabilitation settings. Drivers presenting for assessment are most commonly licensed, older (65 years +), with cognitive/perceptual impairments and multiple medical conditions. Sixty-seven percent of respondents rated being verbally threatened or encountering a "near miss" situation (instructor needs to intervene verbally or with controls to prevent a crash) as medium/high risks associated with conducting on-road tests. The majority of OTDAs use at least one documented on-road test route (86%), which was developed by OTs and/or driving instructors (90%) and takes at least 45 minutes to complete (96%). OTDAs confirmed the need for (a) improved medical practitioner education regarding fitness to drive (b) resources targeting carers and health facilities to support identification and referral of at-risk driver groups (c) further education about licensing authority implemented tests and procedures (d) improving methods for conducting OTDA on-road assessments.

Conclusions:

Any safe system for managing drivers must incorporate provisions for drivers with medical or disability issues: licensing authorities and health practitioners can work collaboratively to meet this goal. The findings of this study help identify those aspects of a safe system that can be further developed to ensure these drivers are optimally identified, assessed and managed.

References:

Di Stefano, M., & Macdonald, W. (2010). An Introduction to Driver Assessment and Rehabilitation, in Curtin, M. (Ed). *Occupational Therapy and Physical Dysfunction: Enabling Occupation*. (6th ed). Philadelphia: Elsevier.