

STILL SAFE AT SEVENTY

The 3.7 million drivers born before the War are amongst the safest people on our roads, and forcing them to take compulsory retests will limit their mobility, be hard to police and do little to reduce accidents.

Public debate needs to focus on older drivers' opportunities to self-regulate rather than on stressful retesting or licensing restrictions.

Ageing drivers do not have more accidents than the rest of the driving population - in fact their safety record is better than that of many young drivers - though their frailty means that when they are involved in collisions they are more likely to be killed or seriously injured. Only when they reach 80, and/or do very limited mileage, does the ageing process and infrequent driving increase their risk.

These are the key findings in the RAC Foundation report 'Maintaining Safe Mobility for the Ageing Population' published today [14th]. The report recognises that:

- 63% of all trips made by the over 70s are by car either as a driver or passenger
- 53% of the over 70s hold a driving licence
- 16% of the UK population is currently over the age of 65
- By 2023 it is predicted almost a quarter of the population will be over 65

Most senior car owners self-regulate their driving behaviour and will not take to the roads in circumstances that make them feel uncomfortable. Identifying the few who do not limit their actions must be achieved without penalising the responsible majority, which is why the RAC Foundation would like to see:

- Health professionals receiving more training about their responsibilities in relation to advising on fitness to drive and the legal implications of their actions;
- More research carried out to see whether capability based assessments - reaction time tests, vision tests - could add to existing medical condition assessments (this would have implications for the whole of the driving population, not just older people);
- Car insurance for the senior age group which prices cover at varying levels depending on the risk associated with factors like the time of day older people drive and the type of roads and traffic conditions they expose themselves to;
- An extension to all age groups of the fitness-to-drive declaration currently made when licences are renewed at 70 through the ten-yearly photo card renewal process;
- When renewal forms are sent out at age 70 they should be accompanied by details of voluntary refresher driving courses already being run by local authorities and others; and
- Changes to the road infrastructure - such as simplified signage with a larger type-face, and larger-lens traffic lights - which recognise that older drivers are more likely to be involved in accidents at junctions and at low speeds.

Commenting on the report, Professor Stephen Glaister, Director of the RAC Foundation, said:

"We are unlikely to see retesting at 70 because despite the myths older drivers are no less safe than other age groups. Retesting in this way could also contravene recently passed equality legislation."
"Older drivers should be encouraged to do refresher training where the evidence shows it has

benefits, but they should see this as an offer of help, not a compulsory measure which will leave them fearful of losing their licence and becoming increasingly house-bound."

"Licence renewal at 70 provides a useful prompt for drivers to consider their health and abilities in relation to driving and this should be extended to the rest of the population through the ten-yearly renewal of the driving licence photo-card which we all have to do."

"It is in everybody's interest to keep older people mobile for as long as they are safe to do so. If driving is no longer appropriate or desirable, alternatives must be in place to allow people to retire from driving and still access the services they need for an active and healthy lifestyle."

ENDS

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Notes to editors:

The RAC Foundation is a charity that explores the economic, mobility, safety and environmental issues relating to roads and responsible road users. Independent and authoritative research, carried out for the public benefit, is central to the Foundation's activities.

The report has been written by Elizabeth Box, Dr Julie Gandolfi and Dr Kit Mitchell.

The ONS mid-2008 population estimate for the UK says there were 7.173 million people aged 70+. At the same time the ONS says there were 175,000 people aged 70+ in Northern Ireland. This means there were 6.998 million people aged 70+ in Great Britain in mid-2008. 53% of this figure gives a GB driving population aged 70+ of 3.709 million.

A breakdown of road casualties killed and seriously injured by road user type and age is available in Chart 1i in Reported Road Casualties Great Britain 2008:

<http://www.dft.gov.uk/adobepdf/162469/221412/221549/227755/rrcgb2008.pdf>

Currently it is the duty of the licence holder to notify DVLA of any medical condition which may affect safe driving. On occasions there are circumstances when a driver will not or cannot do so. According to General Medical Council guidance for doctors, practitioners must make sure patients understand they have a condition which might impair their ability to drive. If a patient is incapable of understanding this advice, for example because of dementia, the doctor should inform the DVLA immediately.

If a patient refuses to accept a diagnosis or the effect of the condition on their ability to drive then they are entitled to get a second opinion. If patients continue to drive when they are not fit to do so then a doctor must make every reasonable effort to persuade them to stop, which may include informing their next of kin.

UK driving licences are normally valid until 70. There is no upper age limit, but after 70 renewal is necessary every three years. All licence applications require a medical self declaration.

The findings of the report have been backed by the Eye Health Alliance, coalition of the professional and representative optical bodies and eye care charities (including the RNIB). A spokeswoman said:

"We welcome this contribution to the debate on the safety of older drivers. Good eyesight is important for all drivers to ensure they can see upcoming dangers, read road signs and read the car instrument panel. Requiring all drivers to have regular eye checks throughout their driving careers

will mean that eyesight problems are picked up and treated early and ensure that as drivers get older their eyesight is preserved for longer.

"Introducing vision screening for drivers when they apply for their licence will also ensure the UK is fully compliant with the EC directive on driving licences. Currently drivers are only required to read a number plate at a distance of 20.5 metres when they take their driving test. Drivers are not legally required to have their eyesight checked until they are 70. The third EC directive on driving licences will require drivers to have an 'adequate assessment' of their vision which must be implemented by member states by 2013."