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Helping keep older drivers safe

Families often struggle with their role when an older relative exhibits signs that driving is becoming more challenging. Attorney Tim Takacs in *Elder Law FAX* (www.tn-elderlaw.com) reports that the American Medical Association (AMA) has published the second edition of the *Physician's Guide to Assessing and Counseling Older Drivers*. The AMA worked with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) on this guide, which is free online to physicians and the public.

Traffic safety programs have reduced the fatality rate for drivers under age 65 years, but the fatality rate for older drivers has remained consistently high. Motor vehicle injuries are the leading cause of injury-related deaths among 65 to 74 year olds and the second highest cause (after falls) for 75 to 84 year olds. According to NHTSA, in 2006, there were 30 million licensed U.S. drivers age 65 and older, which was an 18 percent increase since 1996. These statistics do not take into account the injuries and fatalities that an impaired older driver can cause among younger drivers and passengers.

Physicians are in a leading position to assist older drivers and their families to realize the effects that age and disability have on the driver's abilities. The AMA indicates that not only is it the *right* thing for doctors to observe and counsel older patients, but that physicians have an ethical and legal obligation to report at-risk drivers. Pennsylvania is among the six states that have mandatory reporting requirements.

The Guide provides doctors with resources that enable them to examine how illness, age, and medications affect the patient's ability to drive. It "provides tools such as an office-based assessment of medical fitness and a list of illnesses and drugs that may impact driving." Later this year, the AMA website will offer a continuing medical education course featuring a case-based interactive program which will aid in assessing a patient's fitness to drive.

The information offered for physicians goes further than just how to evaluate older drivers. There is information on treating the causes of functional declines, how to counsel clients on driving restrictions and safe driving behaviors, as well as advice on looking for signs of social isolation and depression in those who must stop driving.

Since families are often the first to notice issues with a loved one's driving abilities, the Guide offers practical tips for patients and families. This could be very helpful in starting the dialogue with a patient's physician on the next steps regarding a conversation on being able to continue to drive. For instance, there is a checklist for drivers titled "Am I a safe driver?" listing such questions as:

- I get lost while I am driving;
- Other drivers often honk at me;
- People no longer will accept rides from me.

Checking any of these statements may indicate that your safety is at risk when you drive. There are driving safely tips included for the driver, as well as tips for caregivers and others who are concerned about their loved one's driving.

The *Physician's Guide to Assessing and Counseling Older Drivers* is a free download at <http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/physician-resources/public-health/promoting-healthy-lifestyles/geriatric-health/older-driver-safety/assessing-counseling-older-drivers.shtml>.