

Time to stop driving, Miss Daisy

BY DENNY ROSEY



Dementia and driving are a hazardous combination but aging and the attendant disabilities that go with it can also be problematic. **Denny Rosey** asked a group of experts at what stage older drivers – with and without dementia – need to hand over their car keys.

A wise and wonderful friend let's — call her Kit — was diagnosed with dementia two weeks short of her sixty-fifth birthday. Occasionally she forgets what socks are for but she can still park a car effortlessly. Driving however is another matter.

A few months after being diagnosed, Kit found herself sitting at intersections wondering what the red light meant, and the green and the yellow, so she pasted notes on the dashboard to remind herself. When she had to ask a parking station attendant to find her car, Kit knew it was time to stop driving.

People with early stage dementia often cannot reconcile why they can park their car but are incapable of making tactical split-second decisions, such as when to turn right into oncoming traffic or when to move between lanes.

“The brain is like a map and different regions of the brain have different functions. If you've been driving for 30, 40 or 50 years, things like parking a car which are basically operational motor skills, are highly over-learned,” says one health professional. “That part of the brain tends to operate at a less conscious level and keeps working quite well even when people have dementia.”

Once people get to the stage where they can't remember what the different coloured traffic lights signify, having to divert their attention for a second or two while they work it out can result in them stopping halfway across an intersection. Or worse.

To get around this situation, spouses, adult children or friends sometimes become 'co-pilots' and give the driver instructions about when to brake, signal or change lanes. Although intended to help, it may be too much information for the driver to process, especially in stressful situations.

Although around 75 per cent of dementia is age-related only a small minority of older people develop the disease. However, the aging process is almost invariably accompanied by at least one disability, and people with age-related dementia are of course just as likely as their peers to have vision, hearing or other impairments. Combine the two and the results can be perilous.

“Many older drivers regulate their driving to accommodate sight impairments or stiff arthritic necks, but people with dementia may not even be aware that their perception of distance for example has changed,” says SA psychologist Chris Hamilton.

A 2000 study by Associate Professor Joanne Wood at the Queensland University of Technology however, attributed most older-driver accidents to vision problems, not dementia. “Older drivers have fatal crash rates comparable to, or higher than, young drivers, and are usually at fault in fatal crashes. A major contributor to their crash risk is deteriorating vision, which exacerbates age-related limitations on judgement, decision making and other cognitive skills.”

But, according to figures provided by the SA Department of Transport Road Crash Unit, people “over the age of 60 (21 per cent of the population) account for 19 per cent of fatalities and 13 per cent of serious injuries”. By contrast, young drivers aged 16-24 (12 per cent of the population) account for “27 per cent of road fatalities and 30 per cent of serious injuries”. Drivers aged 17 to 21 are involved in more road crashes than any other age group.

Older road users are clearly not major contributors to overall road casualty numbers, but the figures become complicated by the fact that older drivers tend to travel shorter distances than their younger counterparts. When accidents per kilometre travelled are taken into account, “older driver crash rates increase substantially with age, and especially those involving a fatal outcome. There is a sharp increase after the age of 65.”

To the chagrin of adult children who've tried urging accident prone parents to give up driving, older people, understandably, can cling to their drivers' licences tenaciously as relinquishing their autonomy and freedom is too painful.

Last year an elderly Queensland driver with dementia went 'shopping' for a doctor who would provide a medical certificate so he could keep his licence. When his own doctor refused to sign the form, he visited other surgeries until he found a doctor who, unaware that the man had Alzheimer's, signed the form without asking penetrating questions or doing a physical examination.

Kit is chauffeured everywhere these days. It's not the same but she's safe and she loves not paying for petrol! 🌀