

Helping Seniors Drive Safely, Perhaps Longer

UC San Diego Experts Train Health Care Professionals for Signs of Age-Related Driving Issues

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Driving is an important means of mobility and independence for older adults, but as seniors age they often experience impairments that interfere with their ability to drive safely. This makes age-related driving disorders an increasingly important public health issue. Through a project called Health Professional Training for Age Related Driving-Disorders (ARDDS), a team of experts from the UC San Diego School of Medicine's Trauma Epidemiology and Injury Prevention Research Center will be training local health care professionals in how to diagnose and refer older patients who may need assistance.

A nearly \$200,000 grant from The California Office of Traffic Safety (OTS), through the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), will enable the UC San Diego team to expand a previous program - the "Road-Safe Seniors" Project (RSS) launched in November 2007 - which screened more than 900 seniors for conditions that interfere with driving, using vision, cognitive and strength testing. The findings included the identification of one in five drivers with health issues affecting driving, many of them previously undiagnosed, and confirmation of reports that early dementia is under-diagnosed in routine care.

"Using the AMA's screening standards for adult drivers over age 65, we will teach health care personnel how to screen and diagnose, and how to refer patients or report problems," said Linda Hill, MD, MPH, clinical professor of family and preventive medicine, UC San Diego. "Patients and families rely on health care professionals to help with the transition from driving to non-driving status. Our goal is to provide medical personnel with skills of confidence in a manner that is well validated and helpful to patients and society as a whole."

Whereas the previous project concentrated on screening patients and training staff at UC San Diego Medical Center and the VA Hospital, San Diego, the new grant will allow Hill and her colleagues to train any eligible physicians, nurses, medical assistants, occupational therapists and health care workers from hospitals and outpatient medical sites across San Diego County.

"Our goal here is not to stop all seniors from driving but to identify and correct any problems," added Hill. "It may be as simple as a new pair of glasses, some adaptive equipment for the car, or physical therapy to improve range of motion. However, there are times when driving safely is no longer possible and health care practitioners need to know the signs and symptoms to watch for."

"If age-related driving issues are left unaddressed, there is a risk of injury not only to the seniors themselves, but also to their families and to others who share the road," said Raul Coimbra, MD, PhD, professor of surgery and chief, Division of Trauma, Surgical Critical Care and Burns, UC San Diego Medical Center. "And what we learn here in San Diego County can and will be shared with other states."

The DMV Ombudsman Program and the San Diego Driver Safety Office collaborated with and support UC San Diego in this endeavor and welcome efforts to engage physicians in screening for ARDDS.

The grant team, led by Hill, includes: Coimbra, Kevin Patrick, MD, professor of family and preventive medicine, and program coordinator Jill Rybar. The UC San Diego team will use screening tools recommended by the American Medical Association (AMA) with the goal of making this part of the standard of care among San Diego's healthcare community.

The Trauma Epidemiology and Injury Prevention Research Center The Trauma Epidemiology and Injury Prevention Research Center is a combined effort of the Division of Trauma, Surgical Critical Care, and Burns with its Level-1 Trauma Center and the Regional Burn Center and the Department of Preventive Medicine at UCSD to investigate and implement preventive strategies to decrease fatalities and permanent disabilities following injury.

UC San Diego Medical Center The UC San Diego Medical Center has been in operation since 1966 and comprises the system of patient services provided at the UC San Diego Medical Center, Hillcrest; UC San Diego Thornton Hospital, La Jolla; the Moores UCSD Cancer Center; the UCSD Shiley Eye Center and other primary and specialty practices of the UC San Diego Medical Group located throughout San Diego County.

School of Medicine The School of Medicine was founded just over 40 years ago and in that short time has become a world-class institution, recognized as having global leaders in research, technology, translational medicine, education and clinical excellence. The region's only medical school, it is dedicated to cultivating and supporting future practitioners and has 521 medical and 289 graduate students, 74 MD/PhD students and more than 600 interns and residents. With a faculty of more than 1,000, the School of Medicine consistently ranks in the top two nationally in research funding per faculty member and ranked 12th in the nation in NIH research funding in fiscal year 2008.

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