

Senior Dilemma: Drive Safely or Give Up the Keys?

UC San Diego Experts Screen for Age-Related Driving Disorders

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How does an aging driver know when it's time to give up the keys? What can be done to maximize the safety of older drivers? These are just two of the questions to be studied by a team at the Trauma Epidemiology and Injury Prevention Research Center at University of California, San Diego, School of Medicine and Medical Center.

The California Office of Traffic Safety (OTS), through the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), awarded the UCSD team a two-year, \$330,000 grant to study age-related driving disorders. The "Road-Safe Seniors" (RSS) Project will provide funding to screen at least 800 seniors for conditions that interfere with driving, using vision, cognitive and strength testing.

"Our goal is to reduce senior injuries and deaths due to driving injuries, while increasing awareness of the mechanisms to screen and support senior drivers," said Linda Hill, M.D., clinical professor of family and preventive medicine, UCSD School of Medicine. "We want to help seniors reduce side effects from medication and health problems that make them a hazard on the road. And we need to help them recognize when it's time to find alternatives to driving."

The UCSD team will use screening tools recommended by the American Medical Association (AMA) with the goal of making this part of the standard of care at UCSD Medical Center.

"Screening seniors in both outpatient and inpatient settings is an excellent opportunity to find treatable conditions and permanent conditions that may interfere with safe driving," said Raul Coimbra, M.D., professor of surgery and chief, Division of Trauma, Surgical Critical Care and Burns, UCSD Medical Center. "We hope to make driving assessments part of our everyday care for seniors."

In California, 17 percent of licensed drivers are aged 65 or older. By age 80, male drivers are four times more likely than 20 year-olds to die as a result of a motor vehicle crash; female drivers, 3.1 times more likely. Based on estimated annual travel, the fatality rate for drivers 85 and older is nine times that of drivers 25 to 69 years of age (*Traffic Safety, Science Servicing Society, 2004*).

By the year 2020, there will be an estimated 40 million drivers over the age of 65. This dramatic upswing makes age-related driving disorders an increasingly important public health issue.

"The issues older drivers face are very different from younger or middle aged drivers," said Christopher J. Murphy, Director of the Office of Traffic Safety. "We have to find the best ways of successfully reaching them. We think this effort will be one of those."

Previously, this team worked with the OTS, training physicians to screen patients for driving issues in an outpatient setting. This is the first time that patients admitted to the hospital will be screened as well.

UCSD Medical Center has served as a Regional Trauma Center for the citizens of San Diego and Imperial counties since 1976, pioneering improvements in the special care needed by trauma victims. The American College of Surgeons' Committee designated UCSD Medical Center as San Diego County's first Level 1 Trauma Center, acknowledging the Center's continuing commitment to the best possible trauma care provided by the best possible trauma team. 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.

The grant team, led by Hill, includes: Coimbra, Kevin Patrick, M.D., professor of family and preventive medicine; John Fontanesi, Ph.D., voluntary assistant clinical professor of pediatrics and family and preventive medicine; and program coordinator Jill Rybar.

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