

Confusing vulnerability with driving skills

AGEING experts say the research doesn't support comments from NSW Police head of traffic John Hartley that older drivers are putting themselves and others at risk.

University of Queensland experts in elder driving safety have rejected Mr Hartley's calls for drivers over 70 to rethink their need to be on the road, saying the long experience of older drivers often makes them safer on the roads.

"If older drivers are in good health then there is no reason why they should not drive up to and well beyond age 70," UQ Ageing Mind Initiative co-director Nancy Pachana said.

"Their greater years of driving experience actually make them less likely to be in an accident."

She said older people were more at risk of dying in accidents, but not because they were worse drivers.

"The NSW Police are confusing greater vulnerability to injury with driving skills," she said.

"Older people have increasingly frail bones and are more susceptible to motor vehicle injuries, not just as drivers but also as passengers and pedestrians.

"It's ageist to state a person cannot drive just because of their age."

Queensland Brain Institute researcher Jacqueline Liddle said age alone was not a good indicator of skill.

Consider your transport options

THE UQDrive Program recommends older drivers who have retired from driving or who are thinking of handing in their licence, consider these steps:

■ **Start to think about your options early.** While you are still driving, try different transport options including public transport, transport services and lifts from family and friends, and make a long-term plan for your transport needs.

■ **Weigh it up.** Take the time to think through all the factors involved in driving and retiring from driving. Look into your priorities and values, put plans in place and think honestly about the positives and negatives of retiring from driving.

■ **Talk to key people** - family, friends and health professionals - about the situation.

■ **It is important to stay involved in the community.** This can be done by using different transport options and taking up new roles and activities.

■ **Stay involved and active.** You should keep doing the things that are important to you. Some people may need to change their routines or move to areas with better transport options.

"Driving performance is more related to health rather than age, so there can be safe drivers at any age," Dr Liddle said.

"Most older people voluntarily stop driving, often at some cost to their independence.

"There are also costs and risks for older people not driving, including risks of depression, isolation and poorer health outcomes."

NSW Council on the Ageing chief executive Ian Day said research showed older drivers were

not more accident prone, although they were more frail and likely to be injured if they were involved in an accident.

"Older people need to be driving as much as anybody else," he said.

"Remember what it was like when you were 17 and you got your licence and that feeling of independence?"

"Well consider it in the total reverse - somebody at 70 loses their licence, they've lost their independence."



'S' for silly idea?

CONCERN - Would you use an S plate?

INSURANCE company QBE has called for an opt-in system that would collect driver data through a black box and use it to inform restrictions if they were needed.

The call came after revelations that 50 Victorian drivers aged 49-85 died behind the wheel in 2013-14 in addition to the 22 from that age group included in the official road toll.

The Road Fatality Review Panel decides which cases will be included in the toll, and the omitted deaths are usually caused by medical conditions or low-speed incidents in residential areas, such as accidents while opening a garage door.

QBE's Frank Peppard told Victorian media a S1 and S2 system based on data from in-car technology could involve using S plates for seniors and gradually restricting older drivers based on performance.

He said drivers could opt into the system. Restrictions imposed could include banning night driving or restricting geographical area.

"Older people should not fear this," he said. "It's to offer them greater options to retain mobility while providing a safety net for the community."

However, Council on the Ageing chief executive Ian Day said the concept of an S plate represented ageism at its worst.

"If older drivers actually represented an increased risk on the roads, QBE would lift its premiums for them," he said.

"If they were really concerned about safety, it would make sense for them to call for measures that tackle the known risk factors for fatal crashes, which are speeding, fatigue, alcohol consumption and distractions like mobile phones.

"An S plate is not like a P plate, which alerts other drivers to the inexperienced nature of the P plate driver. An S plate invites other road users to presume that, on the basis of age alone, an older driver must be somehow lacking, (and) this is simply not supported by evidence."



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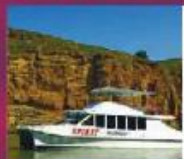
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