DRIVING AND DEMENTIA

My talk is not really about “Taking the Keys Away”, as the Association titled it. Hopefully deciding not to drive is a joint decision, not a forced decision. The person with AD deserves respect and his/her concerns need to be heard. A decision to “retire from driving” (a Tommy Crumpton phrase) is preferable to the Dept of Public Safety making a decision.

WANDERING:

60% of people with AD will wander at some point during their illness. It only takes a moment for someone to disappear. Many will not be able to tell rescuers who they are, where they live, or how to contact loved ones.

Why do people wander?

- Searching for familiar persons, places, things
- Basic needs – thirst, hunger, needs a bathroom
- Escaping from stress, noise, overstimulation, pain, crowds
- Following old routines
- Medications can cause anxiety, restlessness

Disorientation

- Person with AD may have started the journey in and to familiar locations, but became disoriented
- Unable to recognize where he/she is, unable to remember where he is going and why, how to get to intended destination or how to get home again (Still Alice, by Lisa Genova, Pocket Books, NY, 2007)
- Very frightening, very dangerous

Preventing Wandering

- Identify potential causes – address hunger, thirst, toileting needs
- Provide visual info
- Remove “necessary items”
- Redirect the person trying to wander
- Locks and alarms
- Hide the doors
- Safe place to wander

Wandering Safety

- Safe Return or similar programs
- Keep a current photo and description of person with A.D. handy to share with police/news
- Dress person regularly in brightly colored clothing that can be easily seen
· GPS device
· Within home, yard – remove hazards
· Alert neighbors and local businesses before an emergency

Wandering in a Car
· If person with AD wanders and a car is available:
  · Hide the keys
  · Disable the car
  · Use a car locator technology (Lojack, OnStar)
  · Remove the car from the premises if not needed

Driving Safety Issues
· An AD diagnosis does NOT mean that someone must stop driving immediately!
· Persons with **early stage or mild dementia** may be safe drivers.
· It does mean that both driver and loved ones must start evaluating the QUALITY of his/her driving.

Warning Signs of Declining Driving Skills for Drivers with Dementia
(from The Hartford, “At the Crossroads: Family Conversations about Alzheimer’s Disease, Dementia and Driving”, listed in increasing order of risk)
· Decrease in confidence while driving
· Difficulty turning to see when backing up
· Riding the brake
· Easily distracted while driving
· Other drivers often honk horns
· Incorrect signaling
· Difficulty parking within a defined space
· Hitting curbs
· Scrapes or dents on the car, mailbox or garage
· Increased agitation or irritation while driving
· Failure to notice important activity on the side of the road
· Failure to notice traffic signs
· Trouble navigating turns
· Driving at inappropriate speeds
· Not anticipating potential dangerous situations
· Uses a “copilot”
Bad judgment on making left hand turns
Near misses
Delayed response to unexpected situations
Moving into wrong lane
Difficulty maintaining lane position
Confusion at exits
Ticked moving violations or warnings
Getting lost in familiar places (DISORIENTATION)
Car accident
Failure to stop at stop sign or red light
Confusing gas and brake pedals (STOP DRIVING IMMEDIATELY)
Stopping in traffic for no apparent reason (STOP DRIVING IMMEDIATELY)

Behavioral Warning signs
 Decreasing coordination
 Difficulty with spatial relationships
 Disorientation
 Difficulty multi-tasking
 Increasing memory loss, especially STM
 Decreased level of alertness
 Mood difficulties (irritation, confusion)
 Difficulties with personal cares
 Cognitive decline – info processing, problem solving, decisions

Why are Warning Signs Concerning?
 Driving involves many sections of the brain
 Vision and hearing important
 Process, prioritize and analyze incoming info
 Make good decisions quickly
 Remember past similar experiences
 Plan ahead for possible hazards
 Coordinate info, decisions and physical reactions
 Multi-task

 (based on analysis of 422 studies on dementia and driving)
Clinical Dementia Rating (CDR) scale score of 1.0 or above (mild dementia) deemed likely to fail a driver’s test

Score doesn’t tell the whole story – over 75% of persons with score of 1.0 could still drive safely

More Warning Signs from the AAN

A DEMENTIA DIAGNOSIS PLUS

- Accident in the last 5 years
- Older than 70 with 2+ tickets in last 3 years
- Driving less than 60 miles/week
- Self-imposed restrictions (not at night, in the rain, etc)
- Aggressive or impulsive drivers (at any age)

Caregivers should trust their instincts. Caregiver evaluations of the driving risks of their person with dementia tracked well with objective safety concerns.

Persons with dementia did not assess their own capabilities well. Self assessments by persons with dementia that they were safe drivers tracked poorly with actual safety on the road.

Making the Decision: Where do you Start?

- Ideally, the driving discussion starts very soon after the diagnosis of A.D. or other dementias. Safety concerns about driving should be raised very early while the person with A.D. is best able to evaluate the need to drive vs. the risk of driving.
- Don’t delay the discussion until there is a crisis.
- Encourage the person with A.D. to share concerns he/she has about driving.
- Self-limiting driving can be helpful, but it also one of the signs noted in the AAN Guidelines as a sign of increased risk.
- An objective family member or friend can ride with the person with A.D. to evaluate his/her driving skills and safety.
- If the person with A.D. is a safe driver at present, will he/she enter into a written agreement with family that “Joe” will make a decision as to when the person with A.D. is no longer safe and should “retire from driving”? If so, keep signed copies and perhaps a photo of the family discussion as reminders for later.
- Ask a doctor to evaluate the person with AD physically and cognitively for driving safety. Ask the doctor to share the results with the patient and caregivers. If the doctor recommends limited driving or no driving, have him/her write a prescription or letter stating that.
- Ask the person with A.D. to undergo a specialized driving evaluation, usually performed by occupational therapists in a rehab setting. These come in different formats – interview, paper/pencil tests, computerized testing,
driving simulators, actual road tests. The occupational therapist will consider physical and cognitive skills in his/her recommendations. A doctor must order the eval and the recommendations will go back to the doctor.

Driving eval programs

- Baylor Institute of Rehabilitation in Dallas – clinical assessment plus 20-mile road test. OT is Tommy Crumpton, a driver’s rehab therapist. Private pay. Ordered by doctor, results go back to doctor. Doctors should fax referral for driving evaluation to Baylor Rehab at 214-820-8744. There is a waiting list. Price quoted last year for 3-hour eval was approx $820.

- Driving simulator used for evaluation by occupational therapist at Garden Terrace in Fort Worth. Doctor must order evaluation, results go back to the doctor. Cost $185.00 No road test. Contact Garden Terrace at (817) 346-8080.

- Driving evaluation program from Houston rumored to be expanding into DFW. Owner, Chad Strowmatt, is an O.T./driving rehab specialist. Contact them at 713-722-0667 to see if available here yet and re cost.

Texas law

- Licenses renewed every 2 years for 85+
- For 79+, in-person renewal only.
- In-person renewal requires vision test, but not written test.
- In-person does NOT require road test unless DPS employee has safety concern from observation or interview
- Anyone can report concerns about the safety of a driver. Discretionary for doctors in Texas, although the AMA recommends reporting.
- Department of Public Safety, Driver License Division, ATT Customer Service, PO Box 4087, Austin TX 78773-0001. Must report in WRITING.
- Case reviewed by Medical Advisory Board.
- Driver can always request testing by Dept of Public Safety – definitive answer as to whether he/she can legally drive in TX.

The discussion

- Respectful, calm, focused on risks and concerns, no blame/guilt, discussion of possible consequences of continuing to drive
- Neutral parties can help – minister, doctor, mediator
- Best result is person’s decision to stop driving

Alternative Transportation

- Family and friends can drive where needed; invite person with A.D. to accompany them on necessary and fun trips.
- Local senior transportation programs (usually city by city – contact senior center)
Taxi – may be able to set up payment system
In-home caregiver permitted to drive the client’s car or to transport in caregiver’s car
Public transportation – may be confusing
Move to residence that provides necessary transportation – difficult, but may solve multiple problems
Church groups
Volunteer groups
Hire a neighbor
Have services/goods delivered

Contact us at: (Dee Bergan, JD, MA)
E-Senior Services/AIM Mediation
deeb@e-seniorservices.com
www.e-seniorservices.com
972-809-0247