

Safe behind the Wheel?

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“Oh dear, oh dear,” whimpered my newly-wed mother, mesmerized by the headlights of an oncoming car. Aroused from slumber, my dad swung a leg over, tromped on the brakes, and wrested the wheel from her frozen hands.

It was 2 o'clock in the morning of March 3rd, 1939, somewhere in Kansas. Having driven for 16 straight hours, he couldn't keep his eyes open. It was too cold to pull over and they couldn't spend the night in an auto court because their money was running short. They had 800 miles more to reach his childhood home and he needed some sleep. So he'd told her to drive. It was her first time behind the wheel; fortunately, she was only going 30 miles per hour.

Thirteen years elapsed before Mom taught herself to drive her parents' hand-me-down 1940 Plymouth. Somebody came to our village once a month to administer driving tests, so when she felt ready, Mom drove on back roads to the Safeway parking lot, his first customer of the day. “Where's your learner's permit?” he asked.

“I don't have one,” she replied. “I'd have to drive 30 miles on the main highway to your office. I didn't think that was allowed.”

Despite her shaky start, Mom got her license and went on to drive a something like a million miles, commuting sixty miles a day, but mostly spending her summers exploring all 50 American states, well north into British Columbia and much further south into Guatemala.

When she turned 80, she kept on driving. At 82, she drove all by herself from her California home across the continent to South Carolina and back. I advised against it, but she made it without mishap.

If she'd been living in British Columbia she would already have visited her physician twice to complete a Driver's Medical Examination Report. RoadSafetyBC requires it.

I'm all for medical tests. I want to be sure I can see and hear as well as possible and I'd be happy to know my heart's still ticking, my lungs haven't collapsed, and my little grey cells haven't turned black yet.

But some 80+ year-olds among us are complaining about age discrimination. Also, because the exam is required by a third party and doesn't result from any medical condition perceived by the “patient,” it isn't covered by the Medical Services Plan. Doctors set their own rates, and I hear that locally they charge fees ranging from \$75 to \$130 for the same exam. One friend reported

paying \$75, whereupon her physician (no longer on the island) pronounced her fit to drive with no exam at all! Stories have legs; hackles get raised; people like me start asking questions.

The rationale for requiring 80 year-olds to take the exam is their perceived health problems and high accident rates. In reply to our local MLA Gary Holman's questions regarding age discrimination, Minister of Justice Susan Anton and Terry Lake, Minister of Health, replied recently that "health problems tend to manifest themselves, or become worse as we age, and that is why we assess drivers starting at age 80." This compares favourably, they continued, with "many international jurisdictions, some of which require drivers at age 70 or 75 to pay for screening for medical conditions that may affect their ability to drive."

Last March, RoadSafetyBC published a 35-page report supporting its program. Key to its decision is its finding that from 2002-2011 80+ year-olds had caused 69% of the motor vehicle crashes in which were involved. As it happens, 16 to 19 year-old drivers had caused 62 percent of the crashes in which they were involved (Figure 2).

How many crashes did they cause? It might surprise you to learn that the 16-19 year-olds caused over 54,000 crashes whereas the 80+ year-olds caused fewer than 14,000 crashes. As it turns out, 80+ year-olds caused the fewest number of accidents of any age group studied (table 1). In "Teenagers and Crashes," the CAA reported that 16 to 20 year-olds represent 6.6% of all licensed drivers in B.C., but constitute 14% of all drivers involved in a crash.

Nevertheless, the BC Human Rights Tribunal has determined that the requirement of a Drivers Medical Examination Report every two years for 80+ year-olds does not constitute discrimination on the basis of age and is "consistent with [the BC] road safety mandate."

It doesn't seem likely this test will go away soon, so here are a few thoughts on turning 80: Be sure your vision and hearing, corrected as necessary, are at their best possible. Consider taking a driving lesson from Lorne Bunyan at Cornerstone Driving School and showing the results to your doctor. A clean driving record from ICBC might also help. Meanwhile, don't forget to pick up your free birthday cake at Country Grocer!