

Driving with Alzheimer's

Alfonso Martinez, PhD, ABPP-CN

A few months ago, a married couple was referred to the memory clinic for evaluation, and it turns out that both were diagnosed with early stage Alzheimer's. Their son was present at our feedback session, when we communicate results to patients and their family members. Throughout most of the session, the son was particularly supportive, agreeing with the findings of the doctors and telling his parents that this was important information that would help in their treatment, and improve their quality of life. In fact, he even was in agreement that his mother should undergo a driving evaluation. However, when we said that his father also needed to undergo a driving evaluation, *everything changed*. The same mild-mannered and supportive son, in under 2 seconds, became angry and defensive. Understandably, he was anticipating the worse - that both his parents would fail the driving exam, and that they suddenly would become dependent on others (including him) for transportation.

Hands down, driving is the *most* sensitive topic that family members and doctors of individuals with dementia have to address. There are many reasons for this. For one, a person's ability to drive is closely tied to their independence. Emotionally speaking, we hold dearly our ability to 'jump in the car and go.' Practically speaking, the goods and services that we rely on are geographically dispersed, and require travel by car. It is only in some large cities that one may have the grocery store, bank, post office, and doctor's office within walking distance. The public transportation system is difficult to use, especially for older adults who may have issues of decreased mobility. Sometimes family members, friends, and neighbors can help the dementing person with transportation, but many times the person does not want to impose on others.

Especially for widows and widowers, inability to drive is not only inconvenient, but also can be socially isolating. The avid golfer can no longer drive to the golf course and meet his buddies, and the competitive bridge player can no longer get together with her lady friends once a week. Volunteer activities may have to fall by the wayside.

Getting back to my story, the son asked me if I was mandated by law to send his parents for a driving evaluation. I explained that some states do have laws that mandate health care professionals inform the appropriate authorities of patients with dementia who are still driving. Florida is a state that does not mandate reporting, but anyone (doctor, nurse, neighbor, mailman, hairdresser, best friend, worst enemy, etc.) who has concerns about somebody's driving can file a report. The law in Florida protects anyone making a report, assuming that it is done in good faith.

I explained to the son that I feel that it is my professional, ethical, even neighborly (since we all share the road) responsibility to pursue one of several courses, depending on how advanced the dementia is: (1) do nothing since the dementia is so mild that I have no concerns about driving, (2) encourage the spouse or other family members to monitor the patient's driving, (3) encourage a formal driving exam, (4) mandate the exam, or (5) ask the patient to stop driving, and report them to the Department of Motor Vehicles. There

is significant medical research linking cognitive impairment generally, and dementia specifically, with an increased risk of being involved in a motor vehicle accident. This is not surprising since individuals with Alzheimer's loss in cognitive areas beyond just memory. Specific cognitive impairments that affect driving include decreased simple attention (focusing on one thing), problems with complex attention (attending to multiple things at the same time), visual-spatial difficulties (problems judging distances, geographic sense of direction), and problems with executive functions (making rapid decisions, anticipating and planning).

So at the end of the feedback session, the son asks me, "what are you, 29?" (as if to point out what he thought was my inexperience in this field). After politely letting him know that I actually had been practicing for a number of years, it struck me that he had paid me a very nice compliment.

Doctors have no interest in unnecessarily restricting the freedom of their patients. However, when a doctor has reason to suspect that their patient may be unsafe behind the wheel as a result of either physical or cognitive impairment (or both), it is their responsibility to protect the safety of both their patient and the public. Driving is a shared responsibility, and it is a privilege, not a right.