

## SENIORS MATTER

By Robert Griesemer RN, BSN, MS

Professional Senior Care Manager at Prestige Home Health Care  
...a personal care and senior care management company

### Tis better to surrender my sword than my keys...

Giving up the keys is akin to giving up our independence; from our early youth on we have associated driving with freedom and autonomy. Think back to that day when your Dad handed over the keys to the family car. The word excitement doesn't do it justice does it? That moment opened up a whole new world for you, didn't it? No longer dependent on someone to take you here and there. Hanging out and cruising the 'main. ' The Right of Passage'. As the years passed we've become more and more dependent on our car; even to the point of where we live often requires us having a car to get around. So, with that being said, how does one know when it's time to give up the keys and once that happens how do we compensate.

To gain some insight on indicators for giving up the keys, I sat down with Chief James Gage of the Elm Grove Police Department. Our conversation went something like this:

**Me:** "Chief, what is the main cause of accidents amongst the young and older drivers?"

**Chief Gage:** "Among both categories of drivers, inattentiveness is a factor, for the young, it's usually the phone but for older drivers it's due to a loss of skillset, i.e. reflexes and reaction times are slower, some disorientation can occur causing one to panic and make mistakes.

**Me:** "What are the most prevalent traffic violations among young and older drivers?"

**Chief Gage:** "For the younger driver, it's usually excessive speed. For the older driver, it's often a combination of things e.g. following too close, failure to yield at driveways or stop signs, crossing over the line, especially at night."

**Me:** "Is just the fact that one is old a reason to give up the keys?"

**Chief:** "No, it's more a relationship to skillset losses. By that, I mean there may be medical effectors one has to consider such as blood pressure deviations, visual acuity, or ability to handle a car in the rain, at night or while staring into the bright sun. Sometimes, it could be the medications a person is on such as pain medications which may dull a person's senses and reaction time."

**Me:** "If your officers identify an individual who has questionable driving skills, what do they do?"

**Chief Gage:** "Our officers are trained observers so if they identify that a person has a diminished skillset they will refer them to their doctor for medical intervention or to the Department of Motor Vehicles for a reevaluation.

**Me:** "Does this mean a revocation of their license?"

**Chief Gage:** "Not necessarily, a reevaluation can help identify causes of a person's loss of skillset, or contributing factors to unsafe handling of the car. The person may be directed to see their doctor for medical intervention in which case the problem may be resolved. In cases where the person's license is revoked, no matter what age, they have the opportunity to take a driver's test and if successful can regain their right to drive again.

To gain further insight and another perspective I spoke with Mrs. John of Elm Grove. Our conversation went something like this:

**Me:** Mrs. John, when you gave up driving, was it of your own volition or did someone else make that decision for you?"

**Mrs. John:** "My children brought the matter to my attention. It wasn't so difficult as I would have thought, though it does mean moving on to the next life phase. I think it's much more difficult for a man to give up driving; I know it certainly was for my husband."

**Me:** Why do you think that is?"

**Mrs. John:** I think for a man, giving up driving is akin to a hunter losing his ability to hunt. It's as if his manhood is being taken apart piece by piece. We certainly don't plan for the day when someone tells us our driving days are over so the initial shock can be quite overwhelming. Women, I believe are more flexible when this occurs, whereas men feel affronted when the subject is approached, probably because their sense of purpose is acutely altered as is their sense of being the family protector.

**Me:** So, from what you personally experienced and from that of your husband's reaction to losing his driving privileges, what would you advise families to consider when approaching their parent to give up driving?"

**Mrs. John:** "First and foremost, I would advise sons and daughters to bring someone else into the picture when the time comes; that could be a health care professional or the family doctor. Parents naturally close down when approached by a family member to give up driving and hurt feelings abound all around. Another thing I would suggest that all parties involved remember is that giving up the keys means the death of your independence to some extent and you need time to grieve for yourself and the good of the family. The kids need to be very supportive during this time.

**Me:** "So we as children have to be very cognizant of the fact that different people respond differently to the news that driving is no longer an option. Are there certain factors to consider in ones approach with this news?"

**Mrs. John:** Oh yes. The family, most likely your kids need to remember that this action usually brings about a life change; for many, the child now becomes the parent and for a man, it can represent passing along the 'Right of Passage'. The man may feel that he has to surrender his role as provider and protector, thus a real sense of insecurity may set in. I don't think, mainly due to family roles, that this is as devastating for women as it is for men but still for both, it's a disruption in your life.

So, as a follow-up to the information gleaned from Chief Gage and Mrs. John, I'd like to give you a few tips on how you can extend the life of your driving:

Of utmost importance is your mental and physical health: If you have acute reflexes you will be much safer behind the wheel and less likely to hurt yourself or others. The key here is to establish a regular exercise program for the mind and body. T.V. doesn't count. You must get out and walk as well as do repetitive but safe exercises. This action increases blood flow, increases strength, nurtures both mind and body and enhances physiological as well as cognitive function. A key part of the body that affects your driving is your neck. Make sure you maintain flexibility by exercising that part every day. You need to be able to turn your head as you get older to compensate for loss of peripheral vision. To keep your mind sharp, be sure to read, do puzzles, and converse with others. Use the news as talking points for discussion. As you feed your mind with stimulation, remember to nurture your body. If your body is stiff and you lack flexibility you might want to visit a Chiropractor for a tune-up. I know that Dr. Michael La Blanc in Elm Grove will conduct a free Chiropractic assessment and recommend nutritional supplements as well.

Secondly, have regular eye exams and get new glasses as your eye sight changes. There are three main medical problems that can occur. Macular Degeneration is where you lose the sight in the middle of your eyes; Glaucoma is where you lose total peripheral vision due to increased fluid/pressure in the eyes, or cataracts which is likened to looking through Saran Wrap, i.e. blurred vision. There is one other thing that people can experience which is bright flashes in the eye or a dark spot blocking out ones

vision. This is caused by a detached retina and those symptoms require urgent attention from your eye doctor. This is far more serious than common eye floaters.

The last thing I'd like to throw out here is medication compliance. Be sure to take your medications as directed by your physician and at the times ordered. Medications are titred to last twenty four hours so you need to adhere to your regime. Also, keep in mind that pain medications alter your senses so don't drive when under the influence. That goes for alcohol or mixing alcohol and medications as well.

So, I hope this helps a little when it comes time to toss the keys away. Until next month, stay safe!