

Exploring policy and support strategies to improve experiences of the VicRoads medical review process

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Abstract

To encourage and empower drivers to manage their fitness to drive and undergo a fitness to drive medical review if necessary, RACV examined the perceptions and experiences of drivers and the people who have supported someone through review ('supporters') to identify potential support strategies. The research identified gaps in public knowledge about fitness to drive, and dissected the perceptions, triggers, barriers, and emotions related to the medical review from the perspective of the drivers and supporters. Key improvements were also identified, the implementation of which will require collaboration between government and non-governmental entities.

Background

To ensure drivers remain safe on the roads, drivers in Victoria are legally obligated to advise VicRoads of any serious, permanent or long-term medical condition or disability that may impair driving ability. However, the idea of a medical review can be deeply personal and difficult for drivers. To encourage and empower individuals to manage their fitness to drive, perceptions and experiences of the review were examined.

Building upon a prior qualitative VicRoads study which explored the early experiences of drivers entering review and strategies to improve awareness and trust of the system (Steel & Fayle, 2018), this research expanded to qualitatively *and* quantitatively investigate the perceptions and experiences of both drivers *and* supporters to identify potential best practices and support strategies.

Method

Adopting a mixed methods approach, an online survey which examined attitudes and experiences was first conducted with 253 participants across Victoria (150 Drivers who had undergone review or are considering review; 103 Supporters).

To gain richer insights into personal experiences, in-depth interviews (11 individual and three paired driver-supporter interviews) were also conducted with 11 Drivers and six Supporters. Three relevant experts selected by the RACV project team were also interviewed.

All drivers and supporters were recruited via a research recruitment agency identified by the hired consultants.

Results

Eighty-three percent of survey participants knew of drivers' obligation to report any conditions that may impair driving ability, but there was uncertainty about what constituted "any" condition.

Approximately one-third of drivers inaccurately thought the review *always* results in license cancellation. This assumption was exacerbated by fears of losing their independence, livelihood and identity. With these negative perceptions, driver-supporter conversations about undergoing review are often challenging. Therefore, as authority figures, support and advice from medical professionals was appreciated (and expected).

Forty-seven percent of drivers who had undergone review did so mainly due to a sense of obligation, triggered by a doctor's recommendation, or a request from VicRoads or concerned family/friends. Another 47% were primarily driven by a sense of social responsibility.

While drivers (69%) and supporters (60%) often retrospectively rated their experience positively with pride, contentment and relief, nervousness and frustration were common during review. Besides procedural hinderances, emotional barriers due to the symbolism of driving and fear of major lifestyle repercussions also impeded satisfaction with and willingness to undergo review. Additionally, drivers sometimes felt little information was available, with about 20% not knowing where to seek advice at all. Fear and a perceived lack of information meant drivers tended to over-emphasise the negative outcome (i.e. losing their licence), even though almost 90% of drivers can continue driving after review.

To prevent misconceptions and improve acceptance of the review, its aim of risk prevention – not just regulation – must be entrenched in public conversation. Compassion and empathy for drivers with medical conditions will also improve the review experience, the process, and attitudes towards fitness to drive.

Potential support strategies to alleviate drivers' and supporters' apprehensions include increased education, clearer information, financial subsidies and better access to driver assessment services and alternative transport, and consistent evaluation to improve procedural efficiency. Such initiatives will also mitigate increasing future demands that the system will need to cope with.

Conclusions

Overall, these insights into the perceptions and (often emotional) fitness to drive journey of drivers and supporters have shaped RACV's fitness to drive messages communicated to the public and will further inform strategies to encourage self-management of fitness to drive. Finally, collaboration between licensing regulators, health organisations and leading community organisations is required to investigate and implement the suggested improvements to better support the system, drivers and supporters.

References

Steel, S. & Fayle, K. (2018). Exploring collaborative user-centered design to develop ideas for greater social responsibility towards fitness to drive. *Proceedings of the 2018 Australasian Road Safety Conference, 5-8 October 2018, Sydney, Australia*