

National Alliance communiqué: Safe driving with a disability

Compiled by Delia Gray, Royal Rehabilitation Centre Sydney, and Dr Guy Bashford, South Eastern Sydney and Illawarra Area Health Service, from an initial workshop held on 25 June 2010 in Sydney

A rapidly ageing population is making assessment and rehabilitation of drivers with disease and injury-related physical and psychological impairments an increasingly important social and political issue. Rational assessment and training of drivers with disabilities may reduce the down-stream social and economic costs of reduced independence that is a result of the loss of driving and driving licence, whilst maintaining road safety.

In June 2010, an influential and expert collaboration group from across Australia came together to develop an approach to work with governments in finding sustainable solutions to the growing social problem and to make service models and provision nationally equitable and evidence-based. The collaboration group's objectives were to:

- Develop long-term state and national policies and funding strategies that ensure equity and access to driver assessment and training services for older drivers and people with (acquired) disability
- Develop national occupational therapy driver assessment credentialing pathways and equitable and accessible referral systems
- Build capacity within the health, community care and transport sector to provide equitable access to services for all regions where demand exists
- Conduct an annual conference to promote and report upon the establishment of driver assessment services and the safe driver outcomes achieved.

The case for sustainable national driver assessment for people with a disability

Numerous studies reveal an increased crash rate per kilometre driven in groups with a variety of medical illnesses. Many of these are age related or obesity related and are increasingly prevalent. Current approaches to the assessment of driving fitness are often arbitrary and left to health professionals who are ill equipped to make such decisions.

The issues for individuals, their families and communities are overwhelming and require a shared strategy by policy makers and funders, peak bodies and consumer groups, medical specialists and GPs, occupational therapists and other relevant allied health professionals, driver training and driver assessment authorities, transport providers and the car manufacturing industry.

Many people whose ability to drive is affected in this way are required to declare a change in the status of their health to the transport authority and undergo a recognised formal assessment if they wish to get back behind the wheel. Existing services vary greatly between states and within regions, but again, this is a

shared responsibility of the individual, transport agencies, health services, disability services and community groups in every jurisdiction, as well as professional bodies across Australia, and government at all levels.

Access, equity and cost

When a person has to declare a change in their health status and needs to undergo a driving assessment, there are issues of access, equity and cost. For many people the impact of losing their licence includes isolation and depression, and this is particularly so for men. Losing your licence is an equivalent loss to the loss of a partner and can be worse than the injury or health condition that has led to the loss of licence. People need access to a comprehensive assessment in a safe and supportive environment either to help them regain their driving skills and confidence or support them in their transition to stop driving altogether. These services are not funded equitably, nor are services equally accessible across Australia.

The social impact and personal cost to tens of thousands of people in our communities varies enormously depending on which state they live in, whether they live in the country or the city, and whether they are rich or poor. For some, services are fully funded; others bear prohibitive costs; there are those who lose their jobs because they don't have access to a service or can't afford it. For a large number of people, losing their licence and being unable to drive also means losing their independence. Thousands of people live in fear of losing their licence, so they continue to drive unsafely and pose a danger on the road.

A significant issue is the enormous inconsistencies between jurisdictions. Funding for driver assessment and rehabilitation varies greatly between states and rural, regional and urban areas. The cost of a driver assessment to the client varies enormously from government-funded or grant program-subsidised initial assessment fees, to self-funded private fees of up to \$800. Small Medicare and health insurance rebates are possible for some people.

From a review of direct and indirect costs of assessment services provided in the public sector, the approximate cost of an initial assessment is \$1000. By reviewing the national fees arrangements, a conclusion can be drawn that the future of these services is at risk and inequities will increase without financial planning and management. It is also considered that these costs are tiny by comparison to the social costs of inappropriate withdrawal of licence in those who are safe to drive or crash-related costs in those who are not.

There is growing political awareness and increasing political goodwill surrounding safety and driver assessment for people with cognitive or functional impairments. Progress is only likely to be made by meaningful recognition of the roles of different governments and departments.

A plan of action

The collaborative group, comprising medical practitioners, providers, peak bodies, road safety experts and clients, has agreed to work together to focus on ways to ensure people have access to suitable assessment and training. This group has developed a draft action plan:

1. Establish a National Alliance

2. Conduct an annual conference in tandem with a national road safety conference
3. Establish a common accessible communication portal
4. National Assessment Framework
5. Policy and service development to achieve access and equity to assessment and vehicle modifications
6. Equitable and accessible services for all Australians with appropriate funding.

Western Australia's Safe System Working Group

by Sarkis V Petrossian* and Brendan J Marsh**

*Formerly of Main Roads WA, then consultant to Main Roads WA, the State Planning Commission, and various local government authorities and town planners/developers. Email sarkisp@iinet.net.au

**Acting Performance Manager, Main Roads WA. Email brendan.marsh@mainroads.wa.gov.au

Mr Kim Chance MLC Western Australia recently stated in the Legislative Council that the 'fear of failure breeds mediocrity'. What it means for engineers is that we should go beyond standards to achieve the Safe System philosophy.

In a major stakeholder workshop in February 2007, the Commissioner of Main Roads, Mr Menno Henneveld, demonstrated the importance placed upon road safety by Main Roads. He supported the ambitious minimum condition of satisfaction for the New Perth Bunbury Highway (NPBH) project requiring a 10% reduction in serious injuries and deaths compared with current WA best practice. He then set the project aspiration to be 'zero deaths in the first five years of operation'.

The NPBH represented Main Roads WA's highest-value road project, costing approximately \$700m to complete 30km of freeway and 40km of dual carriageway rural highway connecting Perth and the regional centre of the southwest of WA, Bunbury. The Southern Gateway Alliance (SGA) was established to design and construct the road (see Figure 1).

To help the project set a new benchmark for road safety in WA, Mr Henneveld established the Safe Systems Working Group (SSWG1), independently chaired by committed senior engineer, Mr Sarkis Petrossian CPEng, who represented Engineers Australia. Other members appointed to the SSWG included:

- Mr Des Snook, Main Roads Executive Director (responsible for road safety within Main Roads)
- Mr Iain Cameron, Office of Road Safety Executive Director
- Mr David Moir, RAC WA Executive Director
- Mr Ashley Wright, Southern Gateway Alliance Engineering Manager
- Mr Antony Missikos, Main Roads Sustainability and Partnerships Manager
- Mr Brendan Marsh, Main Roads Team Leader Network Operations

- Mr Linton Pike, Estill and Associates (independent facilitator).

On behalf of SSWG, Mr Marsh MIEAust developed the Vision Zero Logical Framework to connect the project's aspiration with tangible targets the road designers could focus upon and to enable appropriate inputs to be determined. During regular fortnightly meetings (usually early morning), the framework was improved and endorsed, and then approved by Mr Henneveld. This led to the Vision Zero Workshop, held in November 2008, which applied the framework to the project.

In addition to Mr Henneveld, the members of the SSWG and key road design and safety personnel within the SGA and Main Roads, the workshop attracted several eminent experts in road safety, including:

- Mr Roger Johansson, Swedish Road Administration
- Dr Bruce Corbin, Monash University Accident Research Centre
- Dr Raphael Grzebieta, University of New South Wales
- Dr Joseph Affum, ARRB Group.

The workshop received a number of presentations (including from the experts) and then proceeded to identify potential road safety solutions for the key serious injury and death crash risks associated with the project in accordance with the framework. During his presentation, Mr Johansson compared United States and Swedish road design standards and noted the similarities between Australian and United States standards. He then referenced the higher rates of serious injury and death in Australia and the United States compared with Sweden.

The workshop and SSWG report was accepted by Mr Henneveld and the SGA, and resulted in the following significant changes on the project:

- improved geometrical approaches to major at-grade intersections along the Forrest Highway section of NPBH