



TRAFFIC SAFETY: 'REMARKABLE' NUMBER OF DOCTORS IGNORE LAW OBLIGING THEM TO REPORT RISKY PATIENTS

Researchers sound alarm over unfit drivers

One-third of those involved in serious crashes had medical conditions that should have kept them off the road, study finds

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Hundreds of medically unfit drivers remain on the road in Canada, resulting in countless crashes and deaths because doctors are failing to report them, researchers have found.

Doctors in seven provinces are legally obliged to report to transport authorities patients with medical conditions that could compromise their ability to drive safely.

But a groundbreaking Ontario study has concluded that very few physicians comply with the law and the legislation needs urgent revamping.

Of 1,605 injured drivers admitted to Toronto's Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre, Canada's largest trauma centre, between 1996 and 2001, researchers found 37 per cent had a reportable condition that made them potentially unfit to drive. But only 3 per cent had actually been reported to the licensing authorities of Ontario's Ministry of Transport.

"One-third of drivers involved in serious crashes were suffering from a chronic medical condition that contributed to the crashes," said Donald Redelmeier, a senior scientist with the Institute for Clinical and Evaluative Sciences in Toronto. "Almost all of them had seen a doctor in the previous year leading up to the crash, yet almost none of them had been reported.

"The extent of this under-reporting is really remarkable."

Dr. Redelmeier said 3,000 people die in crashes in Canada each year, and about one-third, or 1,000, of those deaths can be linked to medically unfit drivers. Yet, their study suggests, only a fraction of these drivers have ever been reported.

Statistics also show that for every 10 drivers killed in accidents, five passengers and two pedestrians also die.

It is pointless having a law on the books that is so widely flouted, Dr. Redelmeier said.

The study, released yesterday in the journal of Open Medicine, found drivers with reportable conditions were more likely to be older and male. Alcoholism was the most common underlying reportable condition, yet the least likely to be disclosed.

But researchers also found doctors had failed to report cardiac conditions, such as unstable angina, or strokes, as well as neurological disorders, such as dementia, seizures, or active psychiatric disorders.

The researchers acknowledged that "restricting drivers ... is no simple task" given the "cultural attitudes toward mobility, the political power of older people and the ambiguous definition of 'medically unfit.' "

Quebec and Nova Scotia leave it to doctors' discretion to report potentially unfit drivers. Alberta has no law on the issue. But this study is the first to review whether such a law, which was enacted about 40 years ago in Ontario, actually works to improve road safety.

"Some of my colleagues are family doctors. They are aware of how embarrassingly low the rates are for reporting ... but it's rarely talked about," said Dr. Redelmeier, who is also a professor of medicine at the University of Toronto.

He noted that doctors are not charged with taking away someone's licence, only sending a warning signal to ministry officials to trigger a separate review of their ability to drive.

The researchers also say doctors "may be disinclined to report patients" because they feel torn between advocating for their patients and protecting society. Some doctors may also worry that patients will not seek medical care if they suspect they could lose their driver's licence after a doctor's visit.

Yet the paper points out that the patient is most often the person disabled in a crash. The researchers reviewed the subjects' driving and medical records, including files from all visits to a doctor in the five years preceding the accidents.

The review did not include sleep disorders, hearing or vision problems and so researchers believe the study actually underestimates the extent of the problem.

No one at the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario, the medical profession's regulatory and licensing body, was available to comment on the study yesterday. But spokesperson Kathryn Clarke, said "it's not something that's frequently a source of complaints."

Neither, she added, could she recall any doctor facing a disciplinary hearing for failing to report a potentially unfit driver in the 15 years she has been with the CPSO.

But in at least two cases that followed motor vehicle accidents, in 1992 and 1994, Ontario courts have found doctors liable for failing to report patients who were medically unfit drivers.

Dr. Redelmeier said lawmakers should consider expanding the law to oblige others, such as mechanics, vehicle insurers, or family members - and not just doctors - to report a medically unsafe driver.

At one time, for example, only pediatricians were obliged to report suspected cases of child abuse to authorities. But teachers, social workers and others in the community now also share that obligation.

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