

Caregivers Connection

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You're Driving Me...?

Scene One – Spring

Son: Mom, Dad shouldn't be driving anymore.

Scene Two – Fall

Son: Mom, do you realize you almost had a really bad accident? Dad shouldn't be driving.

Scene Three – A few weeks later

Neighbor: Your husband pulled out right in front of a car at the intersection.

For the above family, it took a couple more incidents, two visits from policemen, and a letter from the state DMV with an ultimatum the caregiver and her loved one could not ignore. In this case, the man with dementia voluntarily surrendered his driver's license without muss or fuss.

That's not always the case, however. Giving up one's right to drive does not come easily very much of the time. With this action a person loses his or her independence as well as self-sufficiency. A vehicle, for many, is an expression of one's personality and status in life.

But many illnesses—physical and mental—make driving risky for the driver, his or her passengers, and others on the road. A man with lung cancer which has spread to the brain might have a seizure—his doctor says he must not drive; a woman with beginning dementia forgets that she's not driving a stick shift and shifts into reverse while the car is moving; a man with Alzheimer's stops his car in the middle of a freeway during a downpour because he can't see.

How can caregivers and family members deal with this situation without loss of dignity for their loved one? *At the Crossroads*, a booklet published by The Hartford

Financial Services Group, Inc., the MIT Age Lab, and Connecticut Community Care, Inc., offers guidelines to help persons with dementia and their families assess whether or not someone can safely continue to drive. Tips include:

- Observe the person with mild dementia when driving (a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease or other dementia is not automatically a reason to take away driving privileges) ;
- Keep a written record of observed driving behaviors over time; most families restrict driving after an accumulation of warning signs (incorrect signaling, moving into a wrong lane, confusion at exits, driving at inappropriate speeds, getting lost in familiar places, confusing brake and gas pedals);
- Share observations of unsafe driving with the person with dementia as well as with other family members and healthcare providers. Caregivers often achieve better results by seeking support from professionals outside the family. Health care professionals may arrange for an independent driving evaluation.

Conversations at an early stage of the disease may help the person with dementia transition to not driving at a later time. Caregivers can encourage their loved ones to share their feelings about not driving. For a variety of reasons, many caregivers allow their loved ones to drive long after they feel it is safe. Others overreact to common driving errors: a single occurrence of poor driving is usually not cause for a person to stop driving.

People with dementia may adjust more easily to not driving anymore if others gradually assume more of the driving responsibilities. Caregivers, friends, and relatives can offer to drive the person to appointments and social events. Public transportation may be an option early on in the disease process, but becomes too complicated later.

To receive the booklet and other information about dementia, go to www.thehartford.com/alzheimers or attend a Caregivers Coffee at the following times and locations:

June 3, 2014 (first Tuesday of each month) 6:00-7:30 p.m., at The Providence Place, 815 Washington Avenue (Hwy. 60), Grafton;

June 10, 2014 (second Tuesday of each month) 10-11:30 a.m., the County Administration Building, room #117, 121 W. Main St., Port Washington. Contact Julie Irvine at 414 333-1168 or jirvine@marykay.com for information;

June 25, 2014 (fourth Wednesday of each month), 10:00-11:30 at Lakefield Adult Day Center (St. John's Lutheran Church), corner of Lakefield and Port Washington Rds., Grafton.

Lakefield Adult Day Center provides care for loved ones while the caregivers attend a coffee. For more information about any of the Caregiver Coffees, contact Barbara Lindholm at (262) 376-4328 or blindywb2@sbcglobal.net or Julie Irvine.