

Experiences of the Fitness to Drive Medical Review

July 2019

A condition of being licenced to drive in Victoria is the requirement to advise VicRoads of any serious, permanent, or long-term illness, disability, medical condition or injury that may impair the ability to drive safely. Common conditions known to affect fitness to drive are cardiovascular conditions, diabetes requiring medication or insulin, musculoskeletal conditions, dementia, epilepsy, psychiatric conditions, and vision and eye disorders (Austroads, 2017).

However, the idea of a medical review can be deeply personal and emotional for drivers and their loved ones. Thus, RACV sought to better understand this experience and find ways to support and empower people to manage their fitness to drive.

Research Aims

By surveying and interviewing drivers and the friends and relatives who have supported a driver through medical review, this study examined:

- their knowledge and understanding of fitness to drive and the VicRoads medical review;
- their attitudes towards these issues; and
- their experiences of the medical review.

Method

This study was conducted in two phases. The first phase involved a quantitative online survey, while the second phase involved qualitative face to face interviews.

Online Survey

253 adult Victorians of diverse ages participated in this ten-minute online survey. 87 were drivers who had experienced the medical review, 63 were drivers who had not experienced the review, and the remaining 103 participants were individuals who had supported a driver undergoing medical review ('supporters').

Face-to-Face Interviews

Using the insights from the online survey, a total of 20 face-to-face interviews were conducted with another group of 11 drivers and six supporters, and also with three experts in relevant fields.

Amongst drivers and supporters, there were three driver-supporter paired interviews, and the remaining 11 of them were interviewed individually.

Three experts with specialised knowledge about the management of medical conditions and fitness to drive were also consulted in separate interviews.

All interviews were approximately one hour long.

Key Findings

Awareness and Knowledge

It was found that 83.4% of all survey participants were aware that drivers had a legal obligation to report any medical condition that might affect their driving ability in the long term to VicRoads.

However, there was uncertainty about what constituted 'any' medical condition.

While some conditions such as epilepsy and vision impairment were more obvious concerns, interview participants expressed surprise that specific conditions such as multiple sclerosis and diabetes requiring medication or insulin needed to be reported as well.

It was found that 30% of drivers and 13% of supporters held the inaccurate belief that the medical review always results in the driver's licence being cancelled.

Attitudes and Behaviours

Perceptions of Driving Ability

Drivers typically felt they were good drivers, with 76% of reviewed drivers perceiving themselves to be well-adapted to driving with their medical condition, disability or injury. However, only 57% of supporters thought the driver they had supported was well adapted.

There were also stronger beliefs among supporters that the drivers they had supported through review needed to have their fitness to drive assessed. While drivers were more inclined to say they were cautious and capable drivers, supporters were more likely to share their observations about instances of unsafe driving by the driver under their care, which caused them to be concerned for them.

Thinking about the future of one's driving can be a very emotional process, because driving is typically an important part of life for many people.

Therefore, it can be helpful for drivers to discuss considerations about their fitness to drive or the medical review with family and friends who could share different perspectives. Considering various perceptions can help drivers make more informed choices about their fitness to drive.

Attitudes towards Fitness to Drive

It was found that 67% of drivers and 59% of supporters stated that they were comfortable with the idea of reporting themselves or others respectively.

Some drivers chose to manage their fitness to drive by self-regulating, instead of going through the medical review. These drivers felt they were good drivers but were nervous about their capability in certain circumstances. They tended to avoid routes and situations (such as driving at night) that could make them nervous.

These individuals did not claim to be completely fit to drive on the roads (some have even stopped driving all together), but they self-regulated to preserve their independence and avoid having to undertake a medical review.

The reality is that if someone is safe to drive but is self-regulating, a possible outcome of medical review is they retain their licence with certain conditions. Examples of conditions include driving only during daylight hours or within a certain radius. Regular follow-up to manage a medical condition to ensure someone remains safe may also be needed.

The Fitness to Drive Journey

Motivators

Among the 87 drivers who had experienced the medical review process, 47% indicated they had wanted to undergo the process for various reasons. One of the reasons was that they believed it was the right thing to do for the safety of everyone on the road. This sense of social responsibility was a common motivator for drivers to start considering assessing their medical fitness to drive.

Another 47% of these 87 drivers underwent review more so because they felt they had to. This sense of obligation was typically triggered from a doctor's recommendation, a letter from VicRoads requesting them to undergo review, or a request from a concerned family member or friend.

More uncommonly, having experienced a personal medical emergency (e.g. a stroke) also strongly motivated some drivers to undergo review.

Barriers

Emotional Most factors that discouraged drivers from undergoing the medical review were emotional and internal to the driver.

To many people, driving is not just a means to an end. It was found that 73% of drivers who had undergone the process also associated the ability to drive with freedom and independence. Not being able to drive was also perceived to be connected to a loss of identity as a driver and major lifestyle repercussions.

Therefore, when thinking about undertaking a fitness to drive review, people tended to over emphasise the potential negative outcome of losing their licence, even though in reality most drivers (around 85%) are allowed to continue driving after review.

Functional Alongside the emotional barriers, both drivers and supporters felt the process was lengthy. This was mainly because of the waiting time, needing to attend appointments and out of pocket expenses.

There was however a sense of relief felt once the process was completed and often even a sense of pride knowing that someone was safe to continue driving.

Emotions

Among drivers who had gone through the review, 55% stated their main overall feeling of their review experience was positive (happiness, contentment, relief, pride) and only 20% stated their main feeling was a negative emotion (worry, frustration, anger, sadness).

While these rates were similar among people who had experienced supporting someone through the process, drivers were significantly more likely to feel proud of having undergone review.

These positive emotions contrast the negative emotions that were felt more when the review was ongoing.

The interviews revealed that this was because people often work themselves up due to a sense of uncertainty and fear of losing their licence. Coupled with the lack of knowledge that the majority of drivers manage to keep their licence after review, this drove unnecessary anxiety and stress during the review.

Results of the Review

In this RACV study, 76 drivers who had undergone the review knew the outcome of the review. Among them, only 10.5% had their licence suspended or cancelled, with some intending to re-apply for another licence in the future.

It was found that 89.4% of them could keep driving on a full licence or a conditional licence whereby they could drive under certain conditions (such as wearing glasses, driving within specified hours or in specified areas).

The outcomes within this study sample is similar to the outcomes among those in the medical review system. Generally, around 90,000 case files are reviewed annually in Victoria, and around 85% of these case files result in the driver being able to continue driving on a full or conditional licence.

Impact of the results

Drivers and Supporters both saw that the outcome of their medical reviews had a positive or neutral impact on themselves, for the people they are close to, and for other road users. More importantly, only a minority of people thought the outcome of the review was negative.

Conclusion

The commonly held perception that people will automatically lose their licence (and that the medical review process is a means of watching and 'checking up' on people) needs to be flipped.

The fitness to drive process is inherently a preventative approach: VicRoads wants to keep people driving and independent – but drivers don't always see it this way.

In order to remain driving and safe for as long as possible, drivers should discuss medical conditions with their doctors in relation to driving, beyond what is required to manage their condition. For supporters observing changes in driving behaviour, it is also important to start conversations early to avoid needing to urgently react in response to a crisis situation.

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