When Patients Are Unsafe at Any Speed

In 1965, an idealistic young consumer advocate published a scandalous book detailing automobile design flaws (most notoriously in the Chevy Corvair) and resistance by the big three auto makers to add safety features like seat belts, even in the face of evidence that their products posed easily-avoidable risks to the public. Ralph Nader's book Unsafe at Any Speed galvanized national discussion about automobile safety that ultimately led to the crash test standards and greater manufacturer accountability we have today.

Forty years later, it’s time for a similar grass-roots effort to make the roads safer. But this time, the poorly-performing equipment isn’t under the hood, it’s behind the wheel. Drivers with known medical conditions that render them dangerous to themselves and others are a hazard that has been neglected for too long. That’s why we’re addressing it this month in two of our regular columns. In the pages to follow, David Geldmacher, MD and Steve Karceski, MD look at the challenges of assessing driver competence in dementia and epilepsy.

Today’s standards are inadequate and confusing for patients and physicians alike, with just six states requiring that physicians report to the authorities patients who could potentially lose consciousness or experience a seizure while driving. The rules for dementia patients are even more ambiguous. And unlike epilepsy patients, those with dementia are less likely to be aware of a decline in their functioning and its potential consequences. It typically falls to the caregiver to raise the issue, a difficult and stressful experience for the family.

This I’ve seen first-hand. Earlier this year, my 90-year-old grandmother experienced a drop in cognitive function due to dementia. In most ways, she’s the same highly-functional person I’ve always known, but her sudden memory lapses and the ensuing panic attacks leave her fearful and argumentative. But she still has a car, and believes she’s capable of and entitled to drive it. For my mother, the caregiver who bears the brunt of responsibility for her, this is just one more contentious issue to discuss in an already challenging daily routine. Caregivers need allies on this, in both exam rooms and political chambers.

Given its large proportion of seniors, Florida is sorely in need of its own Ralph Nader to champion an effort to enact mandatory reporting requirements. Dr. Geldmacher discusses the recent gruesome case of a 93-year-old who struck a pedestrian and drove with him on the hood of his car for three miles. Two years ago, an 86-year-old man plowed through a farmer’s market at the 3rd Street Promenade in Santa Monica, killing nine people and injuring 45 more—in California, one of the nation’s six mandatory reporting states.

To keep such stories from becoming commonplace, now’s the time for physicians to act. Taking on Detroit didn’t win Nader many friends—in fact, it put him in the cross-hairs of powerful corporate interests—but it was the right thing to do. On January 1st the baby boomers will begin turning 60, at a rate of 8,000 per day. Growth in the number of elderly drivers is a statistical inevitability. The number of accidents they cause doesn’t have to be.