

## Summary

# License renewal and health among older drivers

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*The report describes a study of license renewal requirements for older drivers in Norway, based on qualitative interviews with family doctors and an analysis of licensing register data. In Norway, car drivers are required to provide a health certificate, usually based on a medical assessment by their family doctor, to renew their license in three-year intervals from the age of 80. The results of our study indicate that only a few of the drivers above 80 who apply are not granted a health certificate. The most common cause for not issuing a health certificate is cognitive impairment. Other common causes are visual impairments, use of prescription drugs, and neurological disorders. The family doctors are generally positive towards the age-based health assessment program. The recommended cognitive tests are regarded as useful and these tests are for the most part administered according to official guidelines, although some doctors make some individual adjustments. According to the doctors, the health certificate requirement contributes to the identification of older drivers with high crash risk. Additionally, it may be an incentive for older drivers to consider their own health and driving skills. A potential weakness of the system is that it may impair the doctor-patient relationship. Moreover, the system does not prevent older drivers from making repeated attempts to get a health certificate after being denied one by their family doctor.*

Norwegian drivers with a license for light vehicles (including passenger cars, class B) are required to present a valid health certificate to renew their license from the age of 80. The health certificate is normally issued by family doctors after a medical examination.

In the present study we have investigated:

- **Scope:** How many drivers fail to pass the medical assessment and consequently do not get a health certificate?
- **Reasons:** What are the most common reasons for family doctors not to issue a health certificate?
- **Cognitive tests:** How often are cognitive tests used to assess older drivers' fitness to drive?

To answer these questions, we interviewed 10 family doctors and analyzed data from the Norwegian license register.

## Scope: How many drivers fail to pass the medical examination?

Precise information about how many drivers above 80 years fail to pass the medical examination is not available. Results from our study indicate that only a relatively small proportion of drivers applying for the health certificate fail to pass the examination.

However, we have calculated approximate estimates:

- Per year, between 1.1 and 2.2 percent of drivers 80 years or older apply for the health certificate, but fail to pass the medical examination. This is based on an analysis of interview and licensing register data.
- Among 80-year old drivers, the proportion who does not renew their license is most likely below one percent. This is based on a cohort analysis of register data.

Those drivers who fail to pass the medical examination might have continued to drive, had they not been examined, despite significant impairments.

Additionally, about 1.6 percent of drivers above 80 years get their license revoked for health reasons each year, mostly based on notifications from doctors or other medical staff. Moreover, a considerable number of drivers may voluntarily refrain from applying for a health certificate. They may have stopped driving anyway, or they may consider the chances of passing the examination as small. Our analyses indicate that the proportion of drivers in this category is greater than the proportion of drivers who fail to pass the examination.

## **Reasons: What are the most common reasons for family doctors not to issue a health certificate?**

The main reason for failing to pass the medical examination or to get the license revoked is cognitive impairment / dementia. Drivers with cognitive impairment make up a large proportion of patients who fail to pass the medical examination at their family doctor's and about half of those who get their license revoked for health reasons.

Drivers with cognitive impairments are often unaware of their own limitations. This makes cognitive impairments more challenging than many other health impairments because drivers often have trouble accepting restrictions. Some drivers may even try to hide their problems in order to avoid losing their drivers license.

Other relevant reasons for failing to pass the medical assessment are impaired vision, use of prescription drugs, neurological diseases, cardiovascular diseases, as well as general health impairments. Visual impairments and drug used are often temporary and/or may be amended.

## **Cognitive tests: How often are cognitive tests used to assess older drivers' fitness to drive?**

Cognitive tests are recommended as part of the medical assessment if there are indications of cognitive impairment. According to the family doctors we interviewed, they mostly use cognitive tests according to the guidelines. Some doctors use them in all health assessments for license renewal of older drivers.

The family doctors differ regarding how they administer the tests, e.g. in which order they use the tests and to what degree they make individual adjustments.

Most family doctors said that cognitive tests are useful in discovering cognitive impairments, even in cases where this may be difficult to discover otherwise. Test results also may facilitate communication and avoid conflicts in cases where a doctor has to refuse the health certificate.

## **Overall positive view of the age-based health assessment program, and some critical issues**

In addition to answering the three main questions for this study, the results from the interviews allow some conclusions about the doctors' overall view of the health assessment program for older drivers and its advantages and disadvantages.

- The doctors' overall view of the health assessment program for older drivers is positive. They are of the opinion that the assessments lead to the detection of both temporary and permanent health conditions that impair driving ability. This is especially relevant for cognitive impairments which may be difficult to detect without testing.
- The health assessment program may in itself motivate older drivers to consider their own fitness to drive; consequently, some drivers are likely to give up driving voluntarily because of health-issues.
- There are different opinions about who should make the medical assessments: Family doctors with good knowledge about the older drivers health, or a neutral part which would relieve the family doctors from having a double role towards their patients.
- The doctors differ in the degree to which they adapt the procedure of the medical assessment to the individual patient and in how far they are willing to take individual life circumstances into account, such as consequences of losing the drivers' license for quality of life.
- A weakness with the health assessment program is that some older drivers who do not get a health certificate from their family doctor either change family doctor or go to private health institutions. Such attempts are not detected within the current system.