

ROAD SAFETY FOR SENIORS

In Germany, Trainings Give Older Drivers Confidence

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In Germany, one of the three “super-aged nations,” the issue of older people on the road is steadily growing in importance. The focus of public perception, however, is not that half of pedestrians and cyclists killed in road traffic are aged 65 and older, but that older drivers pose a perceived threat on the road.

It is impossible to generalize that all older people behind the wheel are hazards, because driving ability is independent of age and must be individually assessed. Siegfried Brockmann, head of German Insurers Accident Research, notes, “Health impairments, diseases, and medication are important limitations of driver competence in older people, which become significant at the age of 75. Addressing older motorists proves to be emotionally difficult.”

Various safety courses for older drivers have been offered in Germany for years. Participation is voluntary and usually comes with a participation fee. Many older adults shy away from participating, because they are fearful of confronting personal deficits and, in the worst case scenario, losing their driver’s license—even if this fear is unfounded. Most drivers choosing to participate are already fit to drive; likewise, they are the ones who receive the least benefit.

Inspired by the CarFit program favored by three organizations in

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the United States (AARP, AAA, and AOTA), in late 2013 the German Senior Citizens League and the Dusseldorf police department began developing and offering the free of charge and easy to join ‘Man and Car’—Safety is a Matter of Attitude training. The focus—as with CarFit—is ensuring the driver is properly fitted for his or her vehicle. As part of a questionnaire-based consultation, optimal fit is examined, and if necessary, improved. This should lead to increased safety while driving.

New material was developed after researching legal data and practical experience in traffic accident prevention for older adults. The participant questionnaire is undergoing substantial improvements. In March 2014 the concept was tested using a 10-person focus group. The results were very impressive: Eight participants rated the program as “very good” and two rated it as “good.” All participants left with new adjustments

to their vehicles, most commonly to the mirrors and driver’s seat. All participants said they would recommend this program to their friends and acquaintances. Nine out of 10 participants would even be willing to pay an average of €8 (US\$10) for the training.

Police chief inspector Joachim Tabath coordinates the implementation on the police side, and, together with his colleague Christina Palapanidis, has advised more than 100 older people in Dusseldorf. The 30-minute session training covers safety belt use, as well as proper adjustment of the seat, headrest, steering wheel, and pedals. In one test, the driver is asked to simulate a screeching halt. In most cases, this results from an improperly adjusted driver’s seat, which leads to a noticeable shifting.

As a follow-on test, after the seat adjustment and seat belt have been optimized, the driver is asked to once again simulate an emergency braking scenario. “It is important



1 Police officer at the Dusseldorf police department conducts “Man and Car” training.

that the participants see for themselves how the proper vehicle settings positively affect their driving ability,” says Tabath about the thought that went into designing the program. “We are always surprised that drivers do not know the essential functions of their vehicles. Several times we were able to show participants that the cars they’d been driving for practically a decade came with a height-adjustable belt or rear fog lamps.”

The program also focuses on setting the mirrors properly, to include the ideal angle view when the driver turns his or head toward his or her shoulder. A standard walk-around inspection of the car completes the training. “The feedback on the offer is completely positive,” says Tabath. “Without exception, each participant tells us that he or she has learned something through this training and feels safer.” In addition to individual feedback, it shows that the ‘Man and Car’ program is an important asset in the

traffic accident prevention toolkit for older people. The consultation is designed so that it primarily addresses the attitude toward vehicle safety and not the driver’s skills. “This enables us to arouse interest rather than cause participants to worry about failing during a test,” says Tabath. He adds, “However, in many cases, we come to talk with the participants about their competency to drive as part of the training, in a voluntary and informal way.” After completing the course, each participant receives a booklet with in-depth information.

Future training will include volunteers offering services. Erhard Hackler, managing director of the German Senior Citizens League, states, “The challenges of an aging society are transnational in many ways, even if successful concepts cannot be rendered identically in other countries.” CarFit shows how important international networking is. Currently, German Insurers Accident Research is evaluating the sustainability of the program for the German Senior Citizens League. “We are excited to see how long the ‘aha’ effect reverberates after training.” ●



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