



Assessing Fitness to Drive review

November 2020

The Royal Automobile Club of Tasmania

RACT enjoys a trusted position and extensive market penetration in the community. More than 200,000 Tasmanians are RACT members.

Formed in 1923, RACT is an apolitical and independent transport, infrastructure, road safety, tourism and mobility advocate.

It is committed to supporting and furthering the interests of Tasmanians and does this through a comprehensive program of consultation, education, awareness and public advocacy.

RACT is represented in a number of stakeholder reference organisations in Tasmania and undertakes liaison with government and other groups. It also has three regional advocacy committees which are made up of local volunteers and other relevant stakeholders.

RACT's advocacy activity is defined by a series of public policy documents developed and endorsed by RACT's Advocacy Committee and Board.

These policies have been informed by history, experience, statistical analysis, consultation, industry knowledge and, most importantly, our members.

Nationally, RACT is a constituent member of the Australian Automobile Association (AAA) which represents some 8 million Australian motorists.

Internationally, RACT has joined with other Australian motoring organisations as a member of the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) to work on road safety and related issues at a global level.

Fitness to Drive

Background and evidence

The National Transport Commission (NTC) and Austroads are reviewing Assessing Fitness to Drive (AFTD) 2016, the medical standards that inform driver licensing. The purpose of the review is to ensure that these standards represent best-practice, are up to date and meet the needs of users.

All Tasmanian drivers, regardless of age, must notify their doctor if they develop a permanent or long term medical condition that affects their driving. If their driving ability has been or may be affected, they have a legal responsibility to notify the Registrar of Motor Vehicles of the condition (Department of State Growth, 2019).

At this point, they may undergo a medical assessment to judge whether they require a conditional licence, a licence cancellation or regular check-ups. This is the legal responsibility of the driver not their doctor.

The Registrar will then ask drivers to undertake a medical fitness to drive assessment, either through a specialist medical report, a driving assessment or to provide a report from an occupational therapist driving assessor.

The results from these assessments are then passed back to the Registrar who will assess whether the driver is fit to drive. Some drivers receive conditions/restrictions on their licence, including vehicle class, location or driving times.

Medical and physical impairments for drivers can include:

- Heart conditions
- Hearing and vision impairments/eye diseases
- Diabetes
- Physiological decline
- Neurological conditions like dementia, stroke, Parkinson's disease, epilepsy and multiple sclerosis
- Psychiatric and sleep disorders
- Physical disabilities
- Physical injury (broken bones)

While physical changes associated with ageing, such as frailty, vision, memory and reaction speed, can increase the risk of crashes, this does not necessarily translate into crash statistics. This is usually because older drivers are much more cautious on the road (Department of State Growth, 2019).

However, elderly road users, aged 65 and over, make up about 16% of serious casualty crashes per year while being about 20% of the Tasmanian population. This makes them slightly under-represented in crash statistics (Department of State Growth, 2020).

Furthermore, being “unwell or infirm” has been a relevant factor in just 4.4% of serious casualty crashes (Department of State Growth, 2019).

As a result, after people turn 65 in Tasmania they can renew their driver's licence when it expires, as is the case for all other motorists. This renewal can only be valid for a five year period (Department of State Growth, 2019).

Since 2014, drivers aged 75 years and over no longer need to undertake a mandatory annual medical assessment to maintain their licence (Department of State Growth, 2019).

However, they must self-assess their driving abilities with family, friends or doctors and notify the Registrar of Motor Vehicles if there are changes to their physical or mental state that may impact their driving.

RACT Consultation

During early 2020, RACT consulted with a range of stakeholders in the Fitness to Drive space, including the Tasmanian Department of State Growth (Road User Services), a Hobart-based general practitioner, a Tasmanian occupational therapist, as well as Council of the Ageing (COTA).

The following information was shared with RACT during these consultations.

Department of State Growth

The Department revealed:

- It had consulted with the Australian Medical Association about removing mandatory assessments. Some doctors were opposed to it, but the Department maintains there was not a lot of evidence that indicated mandatory assessments were effective.
- Age is not the determining factor in Fitness to Drive, but it can have a significant impact on someone's ability to drive. Therefore, awareness of self-assessing is vital.
- GPs have a significant duty of care to maintain during Fitness to Drive assessments and as a result have shown a high level of responsibility during this process.
- If there are serious concerns, doctors or family can pass on their assessment directly to the Registrar anonymously.
 - This is not mandatory or common, but some GPs, family, friends and even police do report patients to the Registrar. However, it is the patient's job to self-report.
- There are challenges around drivers losing independence and not accepting losing their licence. However, restrictions can be issued due to a greater need to keep driving.

Hobart GP – Eastern Shore Doctors (anonymous)

The GP revealed:

- The removal of mandatory testing for older drivers is of concern.
- The Fitness to Drive process is difficult for GPs and patients, but it does not need to be changed. Making the process stricter would make it more onerous on GPs. The challenge for GPs is a lack of government support in terms of funding and access to government expertise/resources and additional educational programs/material.
- Most GPs are proactive with the current model and are advocates for safe driving. While it is not a clear process due to the removal of mandatory testing, GPs are honest with their patients.

- If the driver fails a Fitness to Drive assessment, GPs consider issues with the driver and family members in order to get the driver to accept any decisions regarding their licence. Gaining acceptance through patient trust is the preferred approach.
- There is a risk that the driver may not return Fitness to Drive paperwork to the Registrar, but this is not a concern. However, if they are concerned about such issues, GPs can go directly to the Registrar with the paperwork.

Occupational therapist – U-Turn (anonymous)

The occupational therapist revealed:

- The removal of age-based assessments was the wrong decision.
- However, GPs are doing a good job with the current process and don't need to be involved any more than they currently are. GPs take it very seriously but some drivers do not self-declare (minority).
- Families are eager to get involved but there needs to be more education and awareness regarding what drivers need to do. People are good at recognising their limits but cognitive issues such as dementia are not being captured as driver perceptions of their ability is skewed.

Council of the Ageing (COTA)

COTA revealed:

- It is a legal requirement for drivers of all ages to talk to a GP if they have a medical or physical condition.
- However, there is angst around loss of licence, particularly for elderly or regional drivers.
- The current laws are clear but it is the process that causes issues. There should be more education and awareness regarding the process to improve transparency, as well as more sensitivity, for all parties involved (medical practitioners, drivers and families).

Position

Driver and general practitioner accountability

RACT regularly encourages motorists that are experiencing any permanent or long-term medical conditions to talk to their doctor about whether it affects their driving ability. If it is deemed to have an impact on their driving, they have a legal responsibility to notify the Registrar of Motor Vehicles about this condition.

During RACT's consultation process regarding Fitness to Drive, it was discovered that GPs are performing in a satisfactory manner in enforcing assessment requirements.

However, RACT believes there needs to be **continued** accountability from medical professionals in the assessment and reporting of medically impaired drivers of all ages. This must be upheld to the highest standard or RACT will advocate for stricter enforcement measures.

Doctors must continue to be proactive in facilitating interventions relating to conditions that may affect driving ability and reporting these to the driver, family or as a last resort the Registrar of Motor Vehicles.

It may be particularly prudent to educate GPs about the importance of reporting patients to the Registrar if they fail a Fitness to Drive assessment and do not accept changes to their licence. However, as this would be an onerous task for GPs, it should not be legislated. Instead, this action should only be encouraged as a last resort if family and friends cannot sway the driver's acceptance.

As is the current process, interventions should continue to require drivers to undergo a medical fitness to drive assessment (medical report, driving assessment or occupational therapist report) in order for the Registrar to judge whether they require a conditional licence, a licence cancellation or regular check-ups.

General practitioner support

While RACT is satisfied with the steps taken to ensure Fitness to Drive, there are concerns relating to GP support. The GP that RACT consulted with indicated a lack of government support for GPs in the Fitness to Drive assessment process.

RACT believes this needs to be addressed with GPs to improve support, including funding and access to government expertise/resources and additional educational programs/material (see below section). This must be targeted to assist GPs in fulfilling their Fitness to Drive responsibilities.

Education and awareness

Similarly, RACT also believes it is important for government to implement additional and more comprehensive education and awareness programs focussing on the assessment of driving capabilities.

Both COTA and the occupational therapist RACT consulted with criticised the lack of education, awareness and sensitivity regarding Fitness to Drive for all parties involved (medical practitioners, drivers and families). This could be enhanced by additional government education programs/material that compliment current options.

This education must be succinct and sensitive in order to support all involved, but particularly driver understanding and acceptance of any licence changes. This will contribute to a more effective and efficient process for all parties involved in the Fitness to Drive process.

Upon researching this space, RACT found it difficult to understand the process due to a variety of documents differing in their explanations.

Mandatory age-based assessments

The Department of State Growth indicated there was not a lot of evidence that age-based assessments were effective. Furthermore, it is known that older drivers are safer on the road, with data indicating that elderly road users are under-represented in crash statistics.

As a result, RACT supports the Tasmanian Government's decision to allow drivers 65 and over to renew their licence when it is out of date and for drivers 75 and over to self-assess their driving capabilities, alongside family, friends and doctors. However, this must be subject to proper accountability of both drivers and general practitioners as outlined in this submission.