

**Submission
No 14**

DRIVER EDUCATION, TRAINING AND ROAD SAFETY

Name: Ms June Beckett
Date Received: 12/02/2017



Staysafe (Joint Standing Committee on Road Safety.

12 February 2017

Dear Mr. Chairman,

I am grateful to the Committee for the opportunity to submit a few points on the presumed link to the road toll of senior drivers. In May 2016 when this subject was yet again being forcefully discussed I did in fact write to several eminent people, including the Age and Disability Discrimination Commissioner but, sadly, did not receive the courtesy of a reply from anyone.

I see that the Committee's terms of reference do not specifically refer to the role of senior drivers in the overall road toll. However, according to remarks by Minister Duncan Gay and others, the underlying inference is that seniors are largely to blame.

Such an inference is grossly unfair and I write this submission now, not only on my own behalf, but on behalf of other seniors who are deeply troubled by the suggestion that licences will be taken away or travelling curtailed.

In 2016 there was much discussion about age discrimination in the workforce, with a Roy Morgan survey showing that "27% of Australians aged 50 years and over had experienced some form of age discrimination in the past two years." There is no doubt that age discrimination in the workforce should not be tolerated but there is another glaring aspect of age discrimination to which I wish to draw your attention, viz. age discrimination on the roads.

As you know in New South Wales there is the requirement that all drivers aged 75 years have an annual Health Report completed by their GP/specialist. This report, comprising two pages, includes ten headings, viz. Vision, Cardiovascular Disease, Diabetes, Epilepsy, Neurological Conditions, Sleep Disorder, Mental Health/Nervous Disorder, Musculoskeletal Disorder, Substance Misuse and Hearing Loss. This is a very comprehensive list and the inference is that any negative issues disclosed in the report would result in a cancelled licence or at the very least incur restrictions. (Interestingly, one of the most important aspects of good driving must surely be Reflexes but for some reason this heading is not included in the Health Assessment).

Given that the demand for a health check is directed solely at people over 75 years of age, I see this as being quite offensive. It infers that people aged over 75 are to a large extent responsible for road accidents and that they are recklessly driving without regard to their own safety or that of others. While I do not have the statistics available to me, it is my experience, on the contrary, that generally older drivers are not inclined to take risks on the road and that it is the younger driver who is more likely to cause deaths and injuries

through inattention, speed, drug and alcohol use or undiagnosed medical conditions, a fact which is largely reflected in insurance premiums.

As the law currently stands it is possible for a person aged 20 or younger to be granted a drivers' licence and then - barring serious accidents in the meantime - not be required to undertake a health check for 55 years. It follows therefore that those who are grossly obese, possibly with undiagnosed cardiovascular disease or diabetes, or young people using cocaine, ice or other illegal drugs, are presumed to be less of a risk than a 75-year-old. That is a preposterous proposition and I would challenge the authorities to produce statistical evidence to prove it.

So, my question is: If senior citizens are required to show evidence of good health for driving purposes, why aren't all other age groups so required on a regular basis throughout their driving career, say, every ten years? I can't imagine that any senior person would object to a regular health check so long as everybody else was subject to the same mandatory arrangement.

So far as the road accident statistics are concerned, I believe they should be studied with a great deal more care than they obviously have been thus far. It has been claimed that seniors are increasingly over-represented in the figures for road fatalities. That may well be so but I suggest that the figures generally relate, not to drivers but merely to passengers or pedestrians.

Does the Committee have at its disposal figures showing the following:

Accidents CAUSED BY drivers drunk at the wheel

Accidents CAUSED BY drivers under the influence of illegal drugs

Accidents CAUSED BY drivers not paying attention due to the use of mobile phones or other devices

Accidents CAUSED BY drivers speeding.

If not, then I suggest that the Committee does not have all the relevant information that it needs to reach a conclusion. I believe, without proof to the contrary, of all the offending drivers as listed above, few if any are aged 75+. Seniors who generally have a great deal more driving experience than younger people are, for the most part, much less likely to fiddle with texting or mobile phone calls and rarely if ever drive when drunk or under the influence of drugs. Speeding too is usually the domain of the young.

When politicians attempt to explain the road toll, they find it convenient to blame older drivers who are sitting ducks - unable, by and large, to put their side of the story. It is particularly galling to be told ad nauseum that it's a good idea to hand over your keys and take public transport. Such a statement proves only too well how out of touch politicians have become because not everybody lives near a trainline or bus stop.

For example, I live three kms out of Clarence Town which is a small rural community 25 mins from Raymond Terrace. Not only is there no public transport whatsoever but no taxis or even a service station. Apart from the wonderful Neighbourhood Care organisation which operates out of Dungog 21 kms away, which can be called upon to take people to doctors' appointments, there is no other way for people like me to move around the region (I have no family on whom I could call for assistance). Being denied a driving licence therefore would be torment and ostensibly would mean that I'm a prisoner in my own house. There is a community bus which takes passengers once a week on shopping trips to Raymond Terrace or East Maitland but that is all there is – and there is more to life than shopping centres.

As former Treasurer Joe Hockey and others have stated on numerous occasions, we are all living a lot longer nowadays with “average life expectancies approaching 100 years in the foreseeable future” and indeed, unless our Federal Government takes some real action soon to reduce the national debt which has ballooned to alarming levels, in future years most people will most probably be forced to work until they are 75 anyway. It follows therefore that 75 years should not be considered old. However, while that is the theory, in practice the opposite is the case. Just as in the workforce mature people are discriminated against, older drivers too are being treated with disdain. I would query what gives petty bureaucrats the right to make these demands to the exclusion of all other age groups.

If it is relevant, my personal health check is A1; in 52 years of driving, I have incurred one minor infringement; and the only accidents in which I have been involved were two occasions when somebody else drove into the rear of my vehicle.

At present I am a modestly successful watercolour artist and often have to deliver paintings to exhibitions in other areas. If I were to be denied the ability to drive myself, this occupation would come to a rapid end, merely through lack of transport.

The loss of a driving licence to many senior people is a devastating blow but to most it is nothing short of a profound slap in the face. Not only does the loss of a licence mean a loss of independence and enjoyment of life (as many seniors are often reluctant to ask others for help) but gives the impression that they – the seniors – are considered to be useless and a drain on society.

Nobody wants to see death and injury on the roads so, by all means, let us have road rules and health checks but these must be applied to all age groups across the board.

I can assure you that residents of New South Wales of all age groups were increasingly outraged at the despotic nature of the Baird Government so we are hoping that the new Premier will begin to show a bit more empathy to the public and, in particular, the senior citizens of this State. If she does not, I think it is fair to say that we are all ready and willing to display our disgust at the earliest possible electoral opportunity. Foolish pronouncements such as those by Mr. Duncan Gay et al regarding senior drivers only go to

underline once again that the majority of politicians are not only completely out of touch but have a holier-than-thou attitude to the public.

In conclusion, I hope that this Committee can take action to stop once and for all the injustice done to seniors in largely blaming them for the road toll. One suggestion I have is that allowing 17-year-olds to start learning how to drive is too little, too late. School curricula these days contain a very large amount of largely irrelevant material while important subjects such as home budgeting, how to apply for a job, swimming and driving are ignored. It would be much more effective if children at, say, 12 were taught the basic road rules and in particular instructed as to what happens when rules are not adhered to. Country children are often able to drive around their own farm properties at a very early age and consequently, when they attain their P plates, they are a lot more responsible than others who did not have the advantage of learning anything about how to drive a car until the age at which they obtained their L plates.

If the Committee feels that I could be of further assistance, I should be only too happy to make myself available.

Yours sincerely,

JUNE BECKETT