

## **DRIVER EDUCATION, TRAINING AND ROAD SAFETY**

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**PARLIAMENT OF NEW SOUTH WALES**

**STAYSAFE (JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
ROAD SAFETY)**

***INQUIRY INTO DRIVER EDUCATION, TRAINING  
AND ROAD SAFETY***

**OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY AUSTRALIA (OTA)  
NSW DIVISION SUBMISSION**

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## Introduction

The NSW Division of Occupational Therapy Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to Staysafe (Joint Standing Committee on Road Safety) on the significant role and contribution of occupational therapists in whole-of-life driver education, training and road safety.

Occupational Therapy Australia is the professional association and peak representative body for occupational therapists in Australia. As of September 2016 there were more than 5000 nationally registered occupational therapists working across the government, non-government, private and community sectors in New South Wales. Occupational therapists are allied health professionals whose role is to enable their clients to participate in meaningful and productive activities.

Occupational therapists provide services such as driving assessments, physical and mental health therapy, vocational rehabilitation, assistive equipment advice, home modifications and chronic disease management, as well as key disability supports and services.

## The needs of particular driver groups – what occupational therapists can offer

Driving is considered an instrumental activity of daily living (ADL) because it enables community mobility and therefore participation in other occupations. However, some people may be prevented from fully engaging in driving due to a number of factors. These include an accident, injury or illness resulting in physical, cognitive/perceptual or sensory disabilities, congenital disabilities, psychiatric disorders, drug use and factors associated with ageing.

Occupational therapists who perform driving assessments are equipped with advanced practice skills and are trained to assess the driving competence of a person with a medical condition, regardless of age. Additionally, they design individualised driver rehabilitation and retraining programs.

Driver assessor occupational therapists complete a comprehensive assessment of clients to ascertain their functional status, ability to drive safely, and ability to participate in driver rehabilitation and retraining. This includes both an off-road assessment of biomechanical, sensory-motor, cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills; and an on-road assessment of decision-making skills, the client's sense of judgment and observation, and vehicle control/handling. The on-road assessment is conducted in collaboration with an accredited professional driving instructor.

The breadth of training and holistic scope of practice of driver assessor occupational therapists allows for assessing and training of both novice and experienced drivers with disabilities and age-related conditions. Occupational therapists are also ideally suited to prepare older drivers to retire from driving with dignity, with adequate knowledge for mobility outside of driving (Korner-Bitensky et al. 2010).

## Cost and cross-border issues (state-related)

Occupational Therapy Australia has received informal word from consumers that it can be difficult to access a driver assessor occupational therapist, due to factors such as cost (assessments are not usually funded by Medicare) and the availability of assessors. Because of the difficulties related to cost, a limited number of occupational therapists are taking on this advanced practice training and role, resulting in long waiting times for consumers. This is a particular problem in some regional

areas in certain states and territories, which can result in increased demand in urban areas as people travel there to undertake an assessment.

Differences in legislation across states and territories also pose challenges to achieving a national standard of good practice – one such example is the different requirements pertaining to mandatory reporting.

### **Trends in road safety research and crash statistics – the impact of driver assessor occupational therapists on crash risk**

Considerable research has been undertaken in Australia aimed at developing occupational therapy on-road assessment protocols for valid and reliable measurement of driving ability. An occupational therapy on-road driving assessment with a self-navigation component, administered in a standardised format and using objective scoring protocols, has been shown to be a valid and reliable measure of driving ability (Wood & Mallon, 2001; Mallon & Wood, 2004; Wood et al, 2008). Mallon, Wood and colleagues report that the use of such an on-road protocol provides evidence for the justification and evaluation of driver remediation programs, and furthermore has been shown to be predictive of subsequent crash risk in older drivers.

Through off-road and on-road assessments, driver assessor occupational therapists can identify and make recommendations to clients about who should cease driving, provide intervention strategies for those with remedial and retraining potential, and assist others with optimising driving skills that may be affected by age-related conditions (Classen et al. 2010).

### **Conclusion**

Driver trained occupational therapists play an important role in assessing the driving competence of a person with a health condition or disability, as well as those affected by age-related functional decline. They design individualised, tailored retraining programs to remediate functional deficits and therefore help ensure broader community safety. Occupational Therapy Australia believes the experience and knowledge of occupational therapists in assessing functional driving abilities, along with health promotion skills, would be essential to an inquiry into whole-of-life driver education, training and road safety.

We would of course be happy to provide further clarification on any of the matters raised in this submission should this be required.

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POSITION PAPER:

# Occupational therapy and driver assessment and rehabilitation

## About Occupational Therapy Australia

Occupational Therapy Australia is the professional association for occupational therapists in Australia.

Our members are qualified occupational therapists employed throughout the public and private sectors. They provide health care, vocational rehabilitation, and consultancy to clients.

Our mission is to provide member benefits through access to local professional support and resources, and through opportunities to contribute to, and shape, professional excellence.

For more information about Occupational Therapy Australia, visit [www.otaus.com.au](http://www.otaus.com.au).

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# POSITION PAPER: Occupational therapy in driver assessment and rehabilitation



## Summary statement of position

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Community mobility is core scope of practice for occupational therapy. All occupational therapists understand the occupation of driving a vehicle as an instrumental activity of daily living enabling community mobility.

Occupational Therapy Australia recognises driver assessment and training as **advanced** scope of practice. Assessing and rehabilitation or training of drivers with disabilities, age-related health declines or acquired impairments must be performed by occupational therapists with post-graduate driver qualifications (Driver Assessor Occupational Therapists) from an Occupational Therapy Australia recognised training course.

The breadth of training and scope of practice of Driver Assessor Occupational Therapists encompasses the range of capacities required for driving. Some other professions such as optometry and neuropsychology provide focal, in depth elements of assessment. However only Driver Assessor Occupational Therapists encompass driving holistically and are able to provide comprehensive off-road (in the clinic) and on-road (in a dual controlled vehicle) assessment.

## Introduction

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### The occupational therapy profession

*'Occupational therapy is a client-centred health profession concerned with promoting health and well being through occupation. The primary goal of occupational therapy is to enable people to participate in the activities of everyday life. Occupational therapists achieve this outcome by working with people and communities to enhance their ability to engage in the occupations they want to, need to, or are expected to do, or by modifying the occupation or the environment to better support their occupational engagement'* (World Federation of Occupational Therapy, 2011).

### Driving

The occupation of driving is highly valued by many members of our community. However, participating in driving may be influenced by:

- accident, injury or illness resulting in physical, cognitive/perceptual or sensory disabilities
- congenital disabilities
- psychiatric disorders, drug use
- factors associated with ageing (e.g. deteriorating vision)
- lack of information about transport alternatives.

Driving is a complex instrumental activity of daily living, which requires the ability to adapt to different situations and environmental demands. Decisions regarding driving should be based upon not only medical fitness but functional abilities that are related to the capacity for safe driving. A driver's sensory, motor and cognitive skills require detailed assessment to determine the potential impact of any impairments on driving. A recent systematic review of all assessment tools predicting fitness to drive in adults determined behind the wheel assessment remains the gold standard for driving evaluation (Dickerson et al, 2014).

Occupational therapists aim to ensure that individuals can participate in as many of their chosen occupations as possible, hence Driver Assessor Occupational Therapists work with driving instructors, other health team members and relevant licensing authorities to assess and optimise an individual's capacity to drive independently and safely. Across jurisdictions, Driver Assessor Occupational Therapists are recognised as playing an important role in reducing risk and promoting safety.

### Occupational therapist driver assessment and rehabilitation

Driver Assessor Occupational Therapists complete a comprehensive assessment of clients to ascertain their functional status, ability to drive safely and their ability to participate in driver rehabilitation and



re-training (Korner-Bitensky et al, 2006, p316). This assessment process commonly includes both an off-road and on-road assessment (Korner-Bitensky et al, 2010, p317; Classen et al, 2010, p234). On-road assessment component is conducted in collaboration with Accredited Professional Driving Instructors as per occupational therapy practice competencies (Unsworth, 2007).

In Australia, considerable research has been undertaken to develop valid and reliable off-road assessments, and that of standardising the process of conducting on-road assessments. Two Australian off-road assessments have documented reliability and validity. The OT-DORA Battery (Occupational Therapy – Off-Road Assessment Battery) (Unsworth, Pallant, Russell, Odell, 2011) is a comprehensive battery taking approximately 90 minutes and includes a full client history and need for driving as well as assessing a client's sensory, physical and cognitive skills for driving. The Drive Safe, Drive Aware (Kay & Bundy, 2009) examines a client's cognitive skills for driving and the client's determination of their own driving skills. The assessment takes 30 minutes to administer.

Considerable research has also been undertaken in Australia to develop on-road assessment protocols. For example, in Victoria Di Stefano et al have examined the elements that should be included in an occupational therapy on-road assessment route (2012). In Queensland, considerable research has also been undertaken to validate the on-road assessment. An occupational therapy on-road driving assessment with a self-navigation component administered in a standardised format, using objective scoring protocols has been shown to be a valid and reliable measure of driving ability (Wood and Mallon, 2001; Mallon and Wood, 2004; Wood et al, 2008). Mallon, Wood and colleagues report that the use of such an on-road protocol provides evidence for the justification and evaluation of driving remediation programs and furthermore, has been shown to be predictive of subsequent crash risk in older community-living drivers.

## Purpose of position statement

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The purpose of this position statement is to inform the occupational therapy profession, key stakeholders and consumers of occupational therapy services, of the Occupational Therapy Australia position in relation to the advanced practice status of driver assessment and rehabilitation.

## Policy and environmental context

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Driver Assessor Occupational Therapists have been identified as the health profession that plays a major role in driver assessment and rehabilitation services both within Australia and internationally. A process to assess persons whose medical or functional capacity to drive may impact on their ability to drive is crucial in ensuring the safety of the individual, and the community.

The Austroads (2012) National Fitness to Drive Guidelines sets a template for how this may occur with individual states determining their own legislation. Austroads (2012) defines the respective roles of Medical Practitioner, Occupational Therapists trained in driver assessment (Driver Assessor Occupational Therapists) and the driver licensing authority.

### Processes

Assessing safety to drive is a three-fold process – medical fitness, functional ability and licensing:

- Medical Fitness: is the responsibility of medical practitioners and the expectation of them is defined for each of the medical conditions in Austroads (2012). A health professional may request a practical driver assessment to provide information to supplement the clinical assessment in some borderline cases and to assist in making recommendations regarding a person's fitness to drive (Austroads 2012, p22)
- Functional Ability: Austroad's position is that the Driver Assessor Occupational Therapist assess a person's functional status including cognitive function, physical strength and skills, reaction time, insight level and ability to self-monitor driving, the driver's lifestyle and the nature, frequency and requirement for driving, the need for specialised equipment or vehicle modifications, rehabilitation or retraining (Austroads 2012, p22).

### Regulation

Licensing – this includes assessing driving ability to control the vehicle, understanding and application of road law and licencing. Licensing is the sole responsibility of the Driver Licensing Authority. National Fitness to Drive Guidelines are nationally applicable and contain appendices with current legislative situation of each State/Territory. However, the Guidelines are not legally enforceable and some states may choose not to use aspects of the Guidelines.

Occupational Therapy Australia publish Driver Competency Standards upon which driver assessment and

training courses are based. These Standards are currently being revised (Unsworth & Fields). Occupational therapists are also regulated by AHPRA<sup>i</sup>.

## Statement of position being taken

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Occupational Therapy Australia recognises driver assessment and rehabilitation as an **advanced** area of occupational therapy practice. Assessing and training of novice drivers with disabilities or retraining drivers with age-related health declines or acquired impairments must be performed by occupational therapists with post-graduate driver qualifications for Driver Assessor Occupational Therapists from an Occupational Therapy Australia recognised training course.

Other professions have the competence to conduct elements of an assessment; however occupational therapy is the only profession with the breadth of competence to address driving, including assessment and rehabilitation, as a whole. Driver Assessor Occupational Therapists assess biomechanical, sensory-motor, cognitive, intra- and interpersonal components as well as the environmental factors for driving.

Occupational Therapy Australia recognises access to and quality of driver assessment and rehabilitation must be addressed in the interests of the driving public. This includes recognition of the advanced scope of practice of Driver Assessor Occupational Therapists; addressing inconsistent legislation across jurisdictions for the recognition of qualified driver assessment; access to training courses and Driver Assessor Occupational Therapists; costs to individuals requiring assessment; and the need for increased research and an evidence clearinghouse to inform policy.

## Statement of significance to society

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Driver Assessor Occupational Therapists are occupational therapists with advanced practice skills. They undergo post graduate training, and are experienced to assess the driving competence of a person with a medical condition, design relevant driver rehabilitation and driver retraining programs, and provide guidance through the licensing process.

Assessing fitness to drive and ensuring medical standards and clinical management guidelines are in place impacts on the whole community. It is essential both to individuals to enable independence and quality of life, and also to ensure broader community safety.

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