

Medical Examination for Elderly Drivers

Editor's note:

For members' information, we reproduce below our recent correspondence with the Traffic Police.

In view of current developments, the SMA Council will be meeting the Traffic Police Department for further discussions to review the current guidelines on medical examination for elderly drivers. We will update members on further developments.

24 September 2003

Dear Sir

MEDICAL EXAMINATION FOR ELDERLY DRIVERS

We write to share with the Traffic Police, the feedback from medical practitioners who are involved in the medical examinations of elderly patients above the age of 65, in certifying whether they are fit to drive.

The Traffic Police had on 7 October 2002 (ref: TP 6.2.15 cf) helpfully provided its guidance to doctors, of the fact that with effect from 1 November 2002, the frequency for certification of medical fitness for elderly drivers of age 65 and above would be once every 3 years instead of the previous once a year. Accordingly, if a doctor detects some health problem that may degenerate and impair the driving skills within the following 3 years, he should not allow the patient to pass the examination.

Our members have pointed out that it is not uncommon among the elderly to find conditions, such as hypertension or diabetes to name a few, which although not so serious at the time of examination as to disqualify the patient from safe driving, can subsequently deteriorate and predispose the patient to sudden onset of symptoms such as giddiness, or deteriorating vision, which can have implications on the

patient's ability to drive safely. It is often impossible for doctors to predict accurately when such a deterioration may occur if at all. It may depend on the patient's compliance to therapy. Accordingly, if doctors are expected to project 3 years into the future, this could ironically produce the result that more elderly drivers could be found unfit to drive, than if doctors were assured that the patients would be followed up in a year's time when the condition can be monitored and reassessed.

We would therefore like to propose for the Traffic Police's consideration, whether it would be feasible to allow medical practitioners the discretion, to recommend an earlier assessment on a case by case basis, in particular cases where it is felt that the patient has conditions that can potentially deteriorate but it is impossible to predict such deterioration within a period of 3 years. In our view this would allow more elderly drivers to continue driving, and only be certified unfit when there is a clearer medical basis to presume that they may become unfit to drive.

We would appreciate the Traffic Police's comments and advice on this matter.

Yours sincerely

Dr Tham Tat Yeap
Honorary Secretary

3 December 2003

Dear Sir

MEDICAL EXAMINATION FOR ELDERLY DRIVERS

Thank you for your letter on medical examinations for elderly drivers dated 24 Sep 03.

We earlier considered whether we should allow having a 1-year interval for elderly motorists with some health concerns. However, we eventually decided to stick to a flat 3-year interval, because motorists with any medical condition that could render them unsafe should not be allowed to drive for even one year. Therefore, our approach is a conservative one: doctors who encounter elderly motorists in the early stages of any degenerative disease, such as hypertension or diabetes, should not pass them at all as degeneration can set in even before the year is up. The onus then lies on the patient to take the necessary steps to get a clean bill of health before seeking medical clearance again.

Thus, doctors should clear elderly motorists only if they are healthy and do not have any debilitating diseases that could affect their driving for the next 3 years. We note also that a 3-year interval is also adopted by states in the US and in the UK. However, given the concern brought up by SMA, we would like to seek your views on whether it is necessary to introduce measures to alert us of elderly motorists who subsequently developed any medical condition that could render them unsafe on the road after they have been cleared for a 3-year period.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely

Choy Chan Hoe
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Traffic Police Department ■

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