EM0211: The Globe and Mail, March 8, 2002, page A8

Nearly a third of people over 80 too impaired to drive, inquest told

BY GAY ABBATE

Thirty per cent of people over the age of 80 have cognitive impairment that affects their ability to drive safely, but no one knows how many are still on the road, a coroner's inquest was told yesterday.

"I expect that the vast majority have voluntarily stopped driving," said Barry Goldlist, a doctor and University of Toronto professor whose expertise is geriatric medicine.

These drivers pose a problem for public safety, Dr. Goldlist said, and a study is needed to determine their number. A Canadian study on health and aging done in the early 1990s came up with the 30-per-cent figure, he said.

The correlation between age and the ability to drive is the focus of an inquest that began this week in Toronto. It is looking into the circumstances surrounding the death of Beth Kidnie on April 4, 2000, as she crossed a street on a green light.

The driver who killed the 42-year-old mother of three young children was 84 at the time. Pilar Hicks was driving at night along a residential street at no more than 15 kilometres an hour when she made a right turn, striking Mrs. Kidnie twice.

The second blow caused Mrs. Kidnie to fall under the vehicle. She was dragged almost a kilometre to her death.

Dr. Goldlist testified that there is no direct link between aging and driving. "Aging alone has little effect on driving skills," he said, adding that the ability to drive is limited in older people by physical or cognitive problems that affect their ability to think, plan and react.

He told the jury that he reviewed Mrs. Hicks's medical records and found no evidence of physical or mental conditions that would have affected her ability to drive safely.

Mrs. Hicks, who will not be testifying during the two-week hearing because of her age, has told her family and doctors that she has no recollection of the incident or of how it happened.

After hearing the fatal night's events recounted, Dr. Goldlist said that "I'd want to assess her mental state" because a cognitive problem might have played a role.

"When someone behaves in a manner that is not right you need to test for cognitive problems," he told reporters.

He explained that the early stages of dementia can go undetected by family doctors in people who have good social skills. The jury has heard that Mrs. Hicks was a very social person who dressed well and looked much younger than her years.

Mrs. Hicks, now 86, was convicted of criminal negligence causing death and given a 15-month sentence to be served in her home.

The article EM0211 reprinted above is used in Chapter 17 of the STAT 231 Course Materials.

2002-04-10