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STUDY: INJURY PREVENTION STRATEGIES NEEDED FOR OLDER DRIVERS

Occupational Therapy Practitioners Play Key Role in Identifying At-Risk Drivers

Bethesda, MD — As the U.S. population ages, older driver safety continues to evoke public health concern. As noted during the American Occupational Therapy Association's (AOTA) Older Driver Safety Awareness Week in December 2009 (www.aota.org/OlderDriverWeek), the real need is a broader awareness of the solutions, rather than a narrow focus on the problem. Researchers from the University of Florida agree, stating that determining injury prevention strategies for older drivers (age 65 and older) is the best next step to their study published in the March/April 2010 issue of the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*.

While lead author Sherrilene Classen, PhD, MPH, OTR/L, an assistant professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy at the University of Florida, cautions the study is a retrospective analysis based on crash data of 5,345 older drivers in the *2005 Florida Traffic Crash Records Database* and cannot be generalized to the U.S., interesting findings emerged:

- The mean age of crash-involved older drivers was 76.08 years with 45.7 percent females
- 44.6 percent of drivers sustained crash-related injuries with older female drivers having a higher probability to sustain crash-related injuries (44 percent) than older male drivers (29 percent)
- Lane maintenance, yielding and gap acceptance (choosing an appropriately safe time and/or spacing distance to cross in front of oncoming traffic) errors predicted crash-related injuries with almost 50 percent probability and must be viewed as critical driving errors
- Speed regulation errors (34 percent), vehicle positioning errors (25 percent) and adjustment to stimuli errors (21 percent) predicted crash-related injuries to a lesser extent.

"Occupational therapy practitioners can play a major role in identifying drivers at risk," said Elin Schold Davis, OTR/L, CDRS, coordinator of AOTA's Older Driver Initiative. "Through appropriate screening and driving evaluation and rehabilitation, we can help identify unsafe drivers, making recommendations to those who need to stop driving, provide intervention strategies for those with remedial potential and assist others to optimize their driving skills that may be impacted by age-related conditions."

The growing body of evidence supports the development of policies and programs to address the needs of the older driver is about real need and the safe control of a vehicle. The essential question is about function, age being only one criterion, for flagging concern.

"This research provided a framework for classifying violations by types of driving errors. This is useful information for occupational therapy practitioners and policy makers. For example, when reviewing the performance patterns of older adults, occupational therapy practitioners should review driving history or violation records," says Classen. "For example, a violation of *failed to obey a required traffic control device* may be interpreted, based on our results, as potential for having difficulty with *gap acceptance*. Further, more focused testing of client factors, performance skills, activity demands or contextual demands underlying such a driving error may be necessary. Policies on driving ability testing for licensure may also benefit from this information."

Authors: Along with Classen, study authors included Orit Shechtman, PhD, of the Department of Occupational Therapy and National Older Driver Research and Training Center at the University of Florida; Kezia D. Awadzi, PhD, of the Department of Occupational Therapy and National Older Driver

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Founded in 1917, the **American Occupational Therapy Association** (AOTA) represents the professional interests and concerns of more than 140,000 occupational therapists, assistants and students nationwide. The Association educates the public and advances the profession of occupational therapy by providing resources, setting standards including accreditations and serving as an advocate to improve health care. Based in Bethesda, Md., AOTA's major programs and activities are directed toward promoting the professional development of its members and assuring consumer access to quality services so patients can maximize their individual potential. For more information, go to www.aota.org.