



ASKING A DEMENTIA PATIENT TO STOP DRIVING

Most dementia patients should stop driving in the early phases of their illness. This loss of freedom is difficult for the dementia victim to accept. Autonomy, dignity, respect and survival may depend on the patient driving a motor vehicle. Do not take the car keys away from an individual without having an evaluation done first to exclude treatable causes of confusion in the elderly. When the diagnosis of dementia is confirmed, the family must discuss options, with the physician or other health care providers. These decisions are easier when all members of the family and health care team agree on a course of action.

The family should discuss driving in a thoughtful, considerate way with the patient and acknowledge the hardship of losing this privilege. The physician can explain that the decision to discontinue driving will be re-evaluated on a regular basis. This statement is honest since a very small number of patients improve over time and resume driving. Eventually, the patient becomes accustomed to not driving.

Seriously, impaired patients who insist on driving should have the automobile key hidden or the vehicle disabled. Patients who live by themselves represent a special problem that must be handled on a case-by-case basis. The issue should be discussed patiently with the dementia victim and the emphasis placed on protection (i.e., the patient is protecting his or her spouse and family by limiting the opportunity for lawsuits and legal difficulty). Dementia patients who drink or abuse prescription medication should not drive. Patients who can no longer dress themselves or who become lost on their property are at great risk for accidents. Families will feel guilty about insisting that dementia victims stop driving.