

Are You Too Old to Drive?



Since most states don't require periodic tests, it's up to you to

recognize

by Joseph N. Bell

THE HEAD of the motor-vehicle bureau in an Eastern state recently received the following letter:

"My father is 78 years old. He has been driving an automobile for almost 50 years and has always been a good and careful driver. Because he has long been licensed to drive in this state, he has never been required to take a driving examination. In my opinion, he is no longer a safe driver. He reacts slowly and is overcautious to the point of being dangerous. Several times he has almost caused a serious accident.

"I'm concerned not only about his own safety but that of other motorists. Is there any way you could give him a driving test without telling him why?"

The man in question was tested on the pretext that his insurance company demanded a re-examination. He was found to be dangerous, and his license was continued only on condition that he no longer drive at night or in heavy, congested traffic.

It seemed like a severe penalty at the time, but sober reflection convinced the old man that the safety of a great many people was involved.

This was not an unusual instance. Hundreds of similar letters are received each year

by licensing officials. When examiners follow them up, they find that the family worries are justified in an overwhelming number of cases.

This points up two basic facts pertinent to our continuing campaign for safety on the highways: (1) few elderly people—or people of any age, for that matter—are able to appraise their own abilities and stop driving when they are no longer safe behind a wheel; and (2) our present driver-licensing system is woefully weak in discovering and retesting drivers who are no longer competent.

It has long been accepted among most motor-vehicle authorities that the older a driver gets the more frequently his driving ability should be tested. Couple this with the fact that by 1975 nearly half the adult population of the United States will be over 65, and it's evident we have a problem of considerable proportion.

This is not meant as a reflection on senior drivers, but simply as a note of warning for their own safety. As pointed out by Glen Carmichael, assistant director of training for Northwestern University's famed Traffic Institute: "For the senior driver whose vision deteriorates, whose reaction time is slowed, whose attention is easily dis-

tracted, whose frailty places him in jeopardy on the highway, some licensing measures will have to be taken."

MOST STATES have what is known as a "grandfather clause." This means simply that once one gets a driver's license—no matter how long ago—he can renew it indefinitely without taking any sort of driving test.

In many states, no test was required in the first place. As a result, there are more than 25 million drivers, most of them elderly, who have never been subjected to an unbiased driving examination!

Some efforts have been made to legislate mandatory re-examinations. In 1941, New Jersey pioneered by calling in for examination every driver over 65 who was involved in a reportable accident, no matter how minor. The results of this program were startling: barely a third of the drivers examined were able to pass their test with a satisfactory score.

Licenses of these people were not always revoked; in some instances, conditions were put on them—such as staying below a certain speed or driving only during the daytime. New Jersey officials estimate that several thousand dangerous drivers were removed from the highways as

a result of this program, which became a pattern for similar action elsewhere.

But the political pressure to lift the re-examination requirements in New Jersey was tremendous. Elderly people were outraged at this seeming restriction of freedom aimed at a special group, and their complaints were loud and effective—so effective, in fact, that the program was discontinued in 1951.

The senior citizens argued that if they were to be subjected to special examinations, why not, also, the younger people who careen about our highways and are much more frequently guilty of speeding or recklessness?

Ideally, of course, all drivers should be re-examined periodically, and the beginnings of such a program have appeared—notably in the states of North Carolina, Arizona, California, Iowa, Michigan, and Washington.

But where resources aren't available for such a widespread program, licensing officials are almost unanimous in saying that re-examination should start with elderly drivers whose reflexes and reaction times have slowed over the years.

The police lieutenant in charge of Chicago's hit-and-run accident-investigation unit told me: "In spite of the

high incidence of speeding and reckless driving among young people, less than one-half of one percent of the 12,000 hit-and-run accidents we have every year are caused by teen-agers. These kids are sharp drivers and they love and protect their cars. They get involved in relatively few accidents."

FOUR STATES (Delaware, Illinois, Maine, and New Hampshire) now have mandatory re-examination for elderly citizens. Virginia dropped out last year, although experience showed that approximately one out of three elderly drivers applying for license renewal was unable to pass the test.

There seems little doubt that eventually legislation will be the answer to this problem—a licensing program adequate to re-examine all drivers at periodic intervals. But until that time comes, older persons in particular can do much to protect themselves and others by asking: "Am I still safe behind the wheel?"

Although there is no substitute for a test given by a trained examiner, you can get a clue to your driving capabilities by asking the following questions prepared for FAMILY WEEKLY by the Northwestern University Traffic Institute: