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Study suggests closer attention should be given when assessing the safety of drivers with psychiatric or substance abuse issues

KANSAS CITY, Kan. — A new study by researchers at the University of Kansas Medical Center suggests closer attention should be given when assessing drivers with psychiatric conditions or who suffer from substance abuse issues.

Hannes Devos, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the KU Department of Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation Science, was the principal investigator on a multi-institution research team, whose findings will be published in the September issue of Mayo Clinic Proceedings. In the study, researchers examined data compiled from 6,584 patients in 2013 and 2014, who completed a formal fitness-to-drive evaluation at the Center for Evaluation of Fitness to Drive and Car Adaptions (CARA) of the Belgian Road Safety Institute – the only legal fitness-to-drive authority in Belgium for drivers with functional deficits.

The four criteria used to screen the participants, who all reported having medical conditions, included: a referring doctor’s fitness-to-drive recommendation; a comprehensive fitness-to-drive evaluation; the number of motor vehicle crashes; and the number of traffic violations.

The study found that although participants who reported neurological conditions as their primary complaint made up the majority of people studied, they were not the most unsafe drivers among those participating. Statistically, drivers in the study with psychiatric conditions or substance abuse issues were at the highest risk of unsafe driving. About 25 percent of participants with psychiatric conditions and 20 percent of those with substance abuse failed the formal driving-safety evaluation.

The study further suggests that in some cases physicians are more likely to OK drivers to get behind the wheel compared to driving assessment experts using more exhaustive testing and screening devices. Researchers said the more lenient decisions by doctors could be based on vague legal requirements when determining a person’s fitness to drive. A lack of proper evaluation tools might also be a factor, as well as the concerns doctors might have about alienating their patients.

The study authors caution drivers to be aware of how their medical conditions can affect their ability to drive, particularly those with psychiatric conditions, issues of drug abuse, or other medical conditions that may put them at high risk. They encourage physicians and driving evaluators to be vigilant when dealing with people with known psychiatric or substance abuse issues because of the heightened risk factors.

The study is a collaborative effort between KU Medical Center; the French Institute of Science and Technology for Transport; Spatial Planning, Development and Networks; and the Belgian Road Safety Institute. The study was funded by the Belgian Road Safety Institute.

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