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STUDY: DRIVERS WITH DEMENTIA SHOULD BE CAREFULLY EVALUATED BEFORE HANDED THE KEYS

Occupational Therapy Practitioners Play Key Role in Explaining Dangers, Resolving Transportation Options

Bethesda, MD — Traditionally, researchers on driving and dementia have reported that drivers with early Alzheimer's disease may continue to drive for extended periods of time, as long as their driving is evaluated and monitored. However, a study conducted by researchers from Pacific University in Ore. published in the March/April 2010 issue of the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy* found that becoming lost while driving may have more serious consequences than previously understood – ranging from being found injured to being found dead to not being found at all.

In an exploratory study, Pacific University researchers examined 207 reports of lost drivers with dementia over a 10-year period reported by newspapers and media. Seventy drivers with Alzheimer's disease were not found, 32 were found dead, and 116 drivers were found alive, although of those, 35 were found injured. Multiple additional data points were recorded, including miles driven and days missing, in addition to cause of death, such as drowning or exposure to weather.

"Those who counsel both people with Alzheimer's disease and their caregivers about driving may fail to emphasize the potential hazards, even with moderate memory problems. Many people with Alzheimer's disease and their caregivers may not understand how much memory loss affects driving," said Linda A. Hunt, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA, an associate professor with the School of Occupational Therapy at Pacific University. "Occupational therapy practitioners' roles are to evaluate driving ability, including memory; explain the dangers of driving; and provide alternative options for transportation to people with Alzheimer's disease and their families or ways to drive safely within limits. This will help clients maintain their independence while also staying safe."

As noted during the American Occupational Therapy Association's (AOTA) Older Driver Safety Awareness Week in December 2009 (www.aota.org/OlderDriverWeek), Elin Schold Davis, OTR/L, CDRS, coordinator of AOTA's Older Driver Initiative, adds, "With increasing age come changes in physical, mental and sensory abilities that can challenge a person's continued ability to drive safely. Even in situations of progressive medical conditions such as dementia, the focus should be on safety and building a variety of safe travel options for drivers, passengers and pedestrians of all ages. The real need is a broader awareness encompassing solutions, rather than a narrow focus on only the problem."

The researchers note occupational therapy practitioners also should become involved in educating law enforcement and the public so they can be more knowledgeable when communicating with lost older drivers. People who died may have stopped and asked for directions but were not responded to with the recognition that they have a memory problem.

Hunt describes the challenge when observing the driving behaviors of persons with dementia. Their navigation may appear fine, but the learned observer recognizes the driver with dementia's unknowing dependence on cues provided by the other vehicles around them. "It is important for police and others to understand that drivers with dementia may not be able to follow another vehicle home after being found. Those who become lost need to become passengers immediately," said Hunt.

Authors: Along with Hunt, study authors included Alaina E. Brown, MOTR/L, a graduate of the School of Occupational Therapy at Pacific University, and Isaac P. Gilman, MLIS, an instruction and access services librarian and assistant professor at Pacific University.

Reference: *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, Vol. 64, No. 2.

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.