

Where the rubber meets the road: Preparing health care providers to discuss driver safety with dementia patients and their families

Change AGENTS Initiative

The John A. Hartford Foundation's Change AGENTS Initiative was a three-year effort dedicated to improving the health of older Americans, their families, and their communities through practice change. The initiative harnessed the collective strengths, resources, and expertise of the foundation's interprofessional community of scholars, clinicians, and health system leaders. The Change AGENTS Initiative was managed by The Gerontological Society of America.

The 34 projects funded through the Action Awards grants program showcased the improvements that interprofessional teams can bring to light by implementing evidence-based programs into targeted care settings in local environments.

These one-year grants for up to \$10,000 were available to interprofessional teams led by Change AGENTS for the purpose of achieving meaningful change to practice or policy that will improve the health and wellbeing of older adults and/or their families.



“Sometimes when I send my dad to the store for just a couple things, he’s gone for hours.” When Tammy Arms, a nurse practitioner in geriatrics, hears this from the adult children of her geriatric patients, she knows it is time for the patient to stop driving. Nonetheless, the signs that cognitive decline could interfere with driving safety are not so clear to all health care professionals and are much less so to family caregivers.

More than 5 million Americans are living with Alzheimer’s disease, which accounts for some 70 percent of age-related dementias. Estimates suggest that another 5 million people have undiagnosed Alzheimer’s disease.

It is difficult to know just how many people with dementia or Alzheimer’s continue to drive. It is also difficult for their caregivers and health care providers to know when they should stop. Where the Rubber Meets the Road, a recipient of a 2016 Hartford Change AGENTS Action Award, aims to educate both health care providers and caregivers about the dangers of driving with dementia and how to start a conversation about it with patients and loved ones.

“Between an early diagnosis and then later signs and symptoms of problematic driving, there’s very little agreement among health professionals about what their role is and when it’s time to stop driving. That’s one of the reasons we wanted to do this project,” said Diane Pastor, PhD, associate professor of nursing at University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW). Pastor led the project with her colleagues Andrea Jones, PhD, MSW, and Tammy Arms, DNP, both assistant professors at UNCW.

Administered by The Gerontological Society of America, the Hartford Change AGENTS Initiative accelerated sustained practice change to improve the health of older Americans, their families, and communities. The initiative harnessed the collective strengths, resources, and expertise of the John A. Hartford Foundation’s interprofessional community of

scholars, clinicians, and health system leaders to learn from and support one another while they adopted, evaluated, and sustained changes in practice and service delivery. The Change AGENTS Action Awards grants program was designed to support Change AGENTS in implementing promising ideas in practice change.

The Situation

Laws regarding driving with cognitive impairment or dementia vary from state to state. In North Carolina, a driver need only pass periodic vision tests and identify traffic signs. Pennsylvania mandates that health professionals report a new diagnosis which might impair driving capacity to the state's DMV within 10 days of diagnosis. Other states have few or no regulations that might help identify cognitive impairment among drivers.

This situation puts the burden on family members to decide whether their aging parent or relative should continue driving—but it is a touchy subject. Caregivers neither want to take their loved one's independence away nor do they wish to take on the full burden of transportation for the older adult.

“You can clear a room when you bring up this topic,” said Pastor. “People don't want to hear about it.”

In many cases, families decide to defer their concerns until a health care provider says it is time for their aging parent or loved one to stop driving. Surveys have shown, in fact, that older adults believe their health care provider would tell them if they should not drive. Health care providers, on the other hand, do not necessarily believe that is their role—and if it were, where would they draw the line?

“We have all these algorithms for identifying when your fats or cholesterol are too high, or what your risk is in terms of cardiovascular health, but there isn't an agreed-upon assessment that says, OK, now driving has to stop,” said Pastor.

The Solution

Pastor and her colleagues commissioned Theater Delta to create an educational play about driving and dementia. An innovative production company that draws content from the scientific literature, Theater Delta creates evidence-based educational plays about health, social, political, and professional issues.

The company created a 60-minute performance about a family struggling to deal with an older mother who has Alzheimer's disease and continues to drive. After the play, the show's writer-director leads a question-and-answer session in which the actors answer questions from the audience while still in character.

From a practical standpoint, the production covers key red flags of driving impaired by dementia: having difficulty making left turns, confusing the gas pedal and the brake pedal, coming home with unexplained scratches and dents, and experiencing prolonged absences for what should have been a short drive. Ultimately, however, the play recognizes the sensitivity of the subject and serves as a conversation starter for health care providers, caregivers, and older adults.

The project culminated in an educational DVD that includes highlights of the performance. Pastor and her colleagues plan to make this video available in geriatric medical practices and health care

facilities; she imagines that patients and families might screen the video in the clinic and discuss it with their provider or take the video home to watch.

How the Change AGents Action Award improved outcomes

The Change AGents Action Award allowed Pastor and her colleagues to commission the production and produce the DVD. In spring 2017, they will present the video at the annual meetings of the North Carolina Nurses Association and Alzheimer's North Carolina, where they will survey viewers about the potential of the DVD to change behavior in clinical practice and in families.

“All of us who are in practice see that families are wrestling with this, so our aim was to use the evidence in the research literature to help primary care nurse practitioners and social workers who work with these families.”