**Transcript: Behind the Wheel: The BMV Medical Unit Part IV (June 2021)**

Welcome to Behind the Wheel, an audio interview series where you can learn about motor vehicle topics in the State of Maine. Here is your host Larry Boivin.

We are traveling behind the wheel our guest on this edition is Thea Thicket. Thea is the medical review coordinator for the bureau of motor vehicles and this topic of medical reviews and driving, I have to imagine that for a lot of folks not only is it sensitive but somewhat scary.

Yes one thing that a lot of people think is that the bureau of motor vehicles has no right to ask them any questions about their medical conditions because of HIPAA laws so the first thing I would say is that we are not actually regulated by HIPAA. Obviously medical practitioners are. We're regulated by a different law it's called the Driver Privacy Protection Act (DPPA) and it does uh provide for confidentiality of personal uh information including medical information but because of our responsibility as the bureau of motor vehicles to maintain highway safety we do have a responsibility to look at medical conditions.
And people are very afraid because some people are afraid to disclose a condition because they think that if they have the condition they're not going to be able to drive which there's not any condition in and of itself that would preclude driving just because you have the condition other than maybe blindness that I can think of at this moment in time because even people with let's say quadriplegia in many cases are able to drive with an adapted vehicle. Then the other thing that holds people back sometimes is they just don't like the idea that we have medical information but honestly the medical information that we have is very minimal because we don't want medical records per se we have a two-page driver medical evaluation form that asks really specific questions and the doctor fills those out and that's really all we want. We don't want a bunch of other medical record information um so there is a limitation there and then we do protect that information uh you know based on our confidentiality rules if we do have that information in our possession. So uh as far as being afraid to go through it the other thing is some people are afraid because if they have to take a road test that's of course intimidating for a lot of people but the road test really we do use our supervisors for the most part to do the road tests they allow a little bit of extra time so although it's a similar road test to what a person who's 16 maybe in getting their license for the first time is going to come in and take that's really all it is is you know do you know how to operate your vehicle can you make maintain control of your vehicle are you able to follow the rules of the road and driving that sort of thing. And then the the supervisors aren't looking at you know trying to check every little uh detail of the person's driving they just want to make sure that they're able to really continue to operate safely.

More basic control?

More basic control yes.

I want to ask you about some conditions that we hear a lot about and whether or not that prevents someone from driving. ADHD is that a condition that would prevent anyone from driving?

Um it might on rare occasions but generally speaking no um the reason that we do review that condition is just because as the name implies attention deficit um a person may have difficulty paying attention to what's going on while they're driving so we want to make sure that they are able to safely operate and their clinician will fill out a form to indicate to us the degree of the impact of their condition you know on their ability to function basically and then go from there. So if it's fairly minor and it's a in its impairment for that person then we don't even require a road test we just ask them to have their doctor fill out the form and that form will be filled out periodically if they need to take a road test then they may be required to do that and um you know as long as they can pass the road test then they're good to continue to drive.

What about dementia?

Even dementia people with dementia are allowed to drive up until a certain point so basically most people with mild or even moderate dementia are often able to drive people with mild cognitive impairment we don't have a concern for that most people with cognitive mild cognitive impairment don't have any impact on their ability to function day-to-day in any of their activities it's a more of a little bit of a memory loss but a person with mild dementia most of those people are probably in most situations going to be able to continue to drive may not even need to take a road test. But as the dementia progresses as unfortunately most dementias do progress then as the person's cognitive abilities decline they will at some point probably need to take a road test and then at some point down the road when their dementia becomes more severe and affects their functional abilities then they may need to cease driving.

And I know just casually listening to what's happening out on the roadways obstructive sleep apnea has been a major concern in commercial vehicle operation is that something that also is just across the board driving in general?

 Yeah so sleepy driving is a huge concern not only because of sleep apnea but sleepy driving due to a lot of causes is a huge issue right now across the United States. The statistics for crashes related to sleepy driving are high and concerning however a person with a sleep disorder has an increased risk of crash due to not only being frankly sleepy but also possibly slower processing time mentally less paying less attention to things slower reaction time in terms of their body reactions so a lot of the sleep disorders are concerning. Now a person with a sleep disorder isn't necessarily disqualified from driving because of the fact that they have that disorder but the disorder has to be effectively treated and controlled in order for them to continue to drive.

As a health educator what are some of the things as drivers maybe we should be aware of so that we ensure that we're safe?

Well I would say just because we were just talking about sleep disorders making sure that we have enough rest so that we're not tired because a person who is sleep deprived is also at risk of crashes even if they don't have any medical conditions. Let's just say anything that affects our ability to concentrate and pay attention so even emotional distress because of something that's happened could impair our ability to drive also anything that's going to affect our coordination, our range of motion, our strength, our ability to process information those would also be of concern in terms of our ability to safely operate a motor vehicle.

As we travel behind the wheel we've been talking with Thea Thicket Maine's medical review coordinator and we now know a little more about Maine's medical review process, the ability to look at the functional ability profiles which are the basis for medical reviews in Maine and to certainly get a look at those you can visit the bureau motor vehicles website. So our thanks to Thea for sharing her background and knowledge relative to this area so that we can all stay safe as we travel behind the wheel. Tthank you.

Thanks for listening to this episode of Behind the Wheel a production of the Maine Bureau of Motor vehicles in collaboration with Secretary of State Shenna Bellows for more information on a variety of motor vehicle topics visit our webpage at maine.gov/sos/bmv