

AGING

A Law Reduces Driving Deaths, but Why?



A Florida law requiring drivers 80 and older to have their vision tested

appears to have reduced the number of driving deaths among older people.

Writing in the November issue of *Archives of Ophthalmology*, researchers say the fatality rate for drivers in that age group went down 17 percent after the law was passed, even though the overall rate in Florida rose 6 percent in the same period.

The big question remains why. "Perhaps the most apparent reason is that the screening law removed visually impaired drivers from the road," wrote the researchers, led by Gerald McGwin Jr. of the University of Alabama at Birmingham. "However, in reality, the situation is significantly more complex."

To begin with, fewer than 7 percent of drivers in the state were

not allowed to renew their licenses because of poor vision. That alone would be unlikely to explain the drop in fatalities.

But it may be that many elderly drivers did not bother to seek a renewal because they believed they would not pass the vision test, the researchers said. And it may also be that other drivers with vision problems took steps to correct them to get their licenses.

Oddly enough, the study noted that there was little evidence that poor vision played a role in car crashes, and it is possible that the Florida law has forced safe drivers off the road. So if the law has, as it seems, reduced deaths, experts need to figure out why, they said.

"The importance of driving to the well-being of older adults suggests that isolating the true mechanism responsible for the decline is, in fact, important," the study said.

RISKS

First Month After a Heart Attack Is Crucial



People who survive a heart attack are at much higher risk of sudden cardiac

death in the next 30 days, researchers have found.

The findings, which appeared in the Nov. 5 *Journal of the American Medical Association*, suggest that doctors need to closely supervise patients in the month after a heart attack, and that patients also need to be alert to signs of trouble.

"The first month after a heart attack can be envisioned as a period of healing with heart tissue remodeling, which conceptually is associated with a propensity to experience sudden death," one of the authors, Dr. Véronique L. Roger of the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., said in an e-mail message.

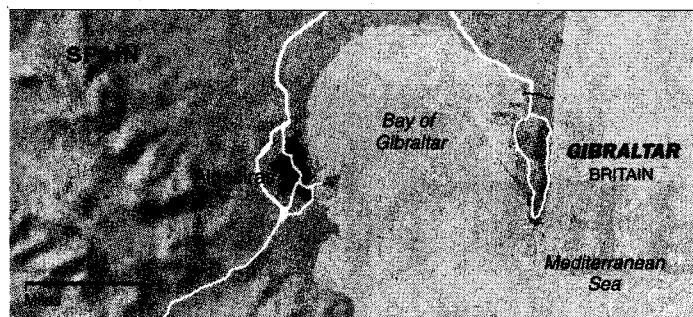
The researchers, led by Dr. A. Selcuk Adabag of the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Minneapolis,

followed the health of almost 3,000 people who had a heart attack from 1979 to 2005.

In the first 30 days, they found, the rate of sudden cardiac death was 1.2 percent, about four times the risk that would have been expected in the general population, once age and sex were taken into account.

But the rate improved greatly over the following 11 months, dropping to a level lower than that usually seen in the general population.

In fact, over all, the study found big improvements in the rate of sudden cardiac death for heart attack patients in the past three decades. The decline, the researchers said, was more than 40 percent. They attributed that to improved treatment for people who have just had a heart attack.



THE NEW YORK TIMES

MEASLES

Fast-Spreading Outbreak Reveals Lower Immunization Rate in Gibraltar

A measles outbreak in Gibraltar has infected almost 1 percent of the territory's 28,000 people in just three months, according to a report by its public health director.

The outbreak, mostly in schoolchildren, made it clear that the authorities had been wrong in assuming that more than 90 percent of children had had measles shots, the report said. Gibraltar is a British territory, and resistance to the measles-mumps-rubella vaccine has been high in Britain since a 1998 report in *The Lancet* speculated that it could cause autism.

That report has been widely discredited, and numerous later studies showed no link between vaccines and autism. Nonetheless, as

a consequence of dropping vaccination rates, Britain has had several local measles outbreaks.

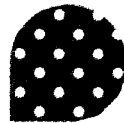
There were 276 cases of measles in Gibraltar from August to October, according to the health director, Dr. Vijay Kumar. There were none in the previous 10 years. The patients' age range was 4 months to 58 years. Most cases were mild.

Gibraltar's inhabitants live in modern but unusually crowded conditions for Western Europe.

Gene analysis suggested that the virus came from an outbreak in the nearby Spanish town of Algeciras. Gibraltar began a vaccination campaign this summer, but the vaccine ran out twice because of shortages in Britain.

PATTERNS

First, Abandoned Pools. Then, West Nile.



Could the subprime mortgage crisis spread West Nile virus? Unlikely as it sounds, this may be just what happened in Bakersfield, Calif.

An aerial survey suggested the connection: foreclosures and abandoned homes produced a landscape dotted with untended swimming pools, Jacuzzis and ponds. From the air, they appeared green and were probably producing swarms of mosquitoes.

The health authorities recorded 140 cases of West Nile virus in the summer of 2007, about a 200 percent increase over the average for the previous three years. At the same time, there was a 300 per-

cent increase in mortgage delinquencies compared with the previous year. Surveillance data in late winter suggested there would be few mosquitoes. But infected dead birds began showing up early, and human cases quickly followed.

Early surveillance and treatment of abandoned pools eliminated the problem in 2008, said the researchers, whose report appears in the November issue of *Emerging Infectious Diseases*.

"Previously, they'd been averaging 40 to 60 cases a year," said the lead author, William K. Reisen, a research entomologist at the University of California, Davis. "This year there were none."

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