

Driver's Test From Hell



“Bilateral foot drop.”

So scribbled my neurologist on a form that the Motor Vehicle Administration (MVA) made him complete to confirm that I was physically and mentally capable of driving a car. Well, this seemingly innocent entry caused quite a fuss. I soon got a letter from the MVA informing me that I could no longer legally drive. Just like that. And, effective the day that I got the letter! A major pain in the butt ensued.

Quick disclaimer: Of course, I don't want to be a danger to myself or others on the road due to MS-related deficits. Accordingly, I actually support this kind of evaluation, just not the way it was implemented in my case. This view is admittedly a lot easier to get behind if you haven't lost your driver's license by the end of the process. Spoiler alert.

So, I recruited my uncle to drive me to the testing facility so I could take a special set of driving exams to retain my license. The assessment began with an examination of my cognitive function. I was asked to answer a series of questions from the Mini Mental Status Examination (MMSE). Piece of cake. It helped that I'd worked on a dementia assessment guideline years before that addressed the use of the MMSE and other mental status tests; basically, I knew what to expect. Well, that, and I actually was still cognitively OK.

Next, I was required to push a simulated brake pedal whenever a light turned red. This was a test of my reaction time, I reckon. No sweat. It was sort of like a game. I passed (or won).

There were assorted other tests of this ilk, and I did just fine. But the most challenging test

was yet to come. Welcome to the hardest on-road evaluation of driving capability ever created. My assessor and I took a drive through and around Baltimore with me behind the wheel of a huge boat of a car. Where were we in Baltimore? Hell, if I knew.

Our first stop, oddly enough, was a cemetery. You see, the car I was navigating came equipped with hand controls for accelerating and braking; and the cemetery proprietor allowed folks like me to try out the hand controls for the first time in a relatively traffic-free area, to wit, a cemetery.

Thinking it might help lighten up a pretty tense situation—it was certainly tense for me and it should have been tense for my assessor – I made a tiny, goofy joke. As we pulled into the cemetery, I said “You know, people are DYING to get into this place.”

Crickets.

The test drive with the hand controls went OK and might even have been fun had my driver’s license not been at stake. We eventually left the cemetery alive and well and headed out for the toughest test yet: Negotiating the Baltimore beltway at the start of rush hour. This beltway is like any other congested maze of highways and on-and-off ramps that encircles a big city. Freakin’ insane, in other words. I wanted to say to my passenger, are you out of your ever-loving mind? But, again, the fate of my driver’s license hung in the balance....

Considering that I was driving an unfamiliar car during rush hour in an unfamiliar part of Baltimore – while I was being evaluated – it’s amazing that we escaped unscathed. And I’m not kidding about that. It didn’t help that the turn signal lever was buried among the confusion of hand controls I’d learned about just five minutes before. Oh, and my MS-related spasticity, which gets worse when I’m under stress, was in full bloom.

The upshot? I passed the test. The ending was anticlimactic: My assessor simply informed me that I’d passed, and my uncle and I went back home. I drove.

My neurologist felt bad that he’d inadvertently created this mess. I shrugged my shoulders and said he was simply doing his job. I do, in fact, have bilateral foot drop and that does have consequences: I often catch my toe when I walk, the left one, especially, and the tips of my dress shoes wear unevenly as a result. But it hasn’t affected my ability to drive a car. Not yet anyway. And thank goodness I haven’t had to repeat this ordeal.