Letter to the Editor

How many young drivers do not meet the driver licencing vision requirements?

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Driving is a highly visual task; poorer vision has been linked to reduced driving safety.\(^1\) In a population-based study, Keeffe et al.\(^2\) reported that uncorrected refractive error is the major cause of impaired vision in middle-aged and older drivers. As the prevalence of myopia increases worldwide and in Australia,\(^3\) especially in the younger demographic, we may expect a significant proportion of young adults failing to meet the vision standard for a private driver licence in Australia (i.e. VA of 6/12 in the better seeing eye) or have sub-optimal vision due to under-/uncorrected myopia. Here, we assessed the visual acuity (VA) and refractive error of young licenced drivers in Western Australia.

This was conducted as part of the Raine Study, a longitudinal study that has followed a cohort since their birth in 1989–1992. At the 20-year follow-up of the Raine Study\(^4\) conducted in 2010–2012, 1,344 participants completed an eye examination. The nature of the study was fully explained to participants and written informed consent was obtained. This study complied with the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the University of Western Australia’s Human Research Ethics Committee.

Presenting VA (habitual driving correction), post-cycloplegic autorefraction, and spectacle lens were measured. Amount of under-correction was determined using the dioptric difference in spherical equivalent between the autorefraction and spectacle lens measurements (if any).

Of the 1,344 participants, 428 did not provide information on whether they had a driver’s licence and 196 did not have a driver’s licence at the time of their eye assessment, leaving a total of 720 licenced drivers included in the analysis (19–22 years old, 48.3% males).

Five participants (0.7% of sample; 1 male) had presenting better eye VA of worse than 6/12. Two of these 5 participants did not wear spectacles and had uncorrected myopia by at least -1.50D; 2 participants wore spectacles but were under-corrected for their myopia by -1.00 to -1.75D; and 1 had uncorrected astigmatism of -0.75DC
in each eye. For all of these participants, VAs improved to 6/7.5 or better with pinholes.

There were in total 123 (14.5%; 62 males) participants with under-/uncorrected myopia by at least -0.5D, including 42 (4.9%; 18 males) and 6 (0.7%; 2 male) who were under-/uncorrected by at least -1D and -2D, respectively. There was no difference by sex between those with and without under-/uncorrected myopia or VA less than 6/12 (p>0.05).

These findings have important implications for road safety as low levels of refractive blur have been shown to impair driving performance, even if an individual’s VA still meets the driving vision standard. A closed-road driving study reported that inducing refractive blur at low levels (using +0.5D, +1D, +2D optical lenses) resulted in the driver recognising fewer road signs and having shorter distance-to-sign recognition as well as poorer detection and avoidance of hazards compared to best-corrected VA, with these effects exacerbated during night-time. The authors of that study have also previously demonstrated that refractive blur has a larger impact on the driving performance of young adults compared to their older counterparts. Furthermore, at 19–22 years old, many of the drivers we studied may be novices, who are known to have higher crash rates. In those drivers whose presenting VA was the VA could be improved with pinhole, which shows that they simply needed an updated prescription. As refractive error may progress in early adulthood after a person initially receives a driver’s licence, we recommend that younger drivers have regular eye examinations on a yearly basis or as recommended by their eyecare practitioner to detect changes in refractive error.

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