

DRIVING

By Dr Jon Stamford

When you are diagnosed with Parkinson's in the UK, you are obliged to report this to the [DVLA \(Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency\)](#). And there are good reasons for doing so, not least of which is the fact that the failure to do so invalidates your car insurance. In any case, it's not an unreasonable stipulation – after all, any condition which affects your ability to move has, in theory at least, the capacity to influence your ability to drive a car. Driving is of course a combination of complex movement sequences. Although we take many of these were granted, think back to when you were learning to drive. Motor sequences that are now second nature were often significant challenges while learning to drive. Think of clutch control for instance.



I remember, when I was 17, thinking that I would never get the hang of clutch control. I recall executing my first three-point turn with my instructor. He congratulated me on its completion. 'On your first lesson Mr Stamford you were unable to move the car in first gear. Now you can do it in third.' At least that explained the smell of burning as I tested the clutch to destruction. Somehow my instructor's penchant for sarcasm never quite gelled with me. I changed tutors.

So much information has to be integrated at a cognitive level whilst driving. And it is a measure of one's progress as a driver that many of the tasks that seem so alien to the learner are executed almost subconsciously in the experienced driver. As a learner I can remember almost mouthing the words "mirror-signal-manoeuvre" or as the mocking tones of my instructor went 'manoeuvre – signal – apologise'. Eventually these motor sequences become subconscious acts (even with my caustic instructor). We execute these procedures without any conscious thought.

Parkinson's of course influences not just motor function but also executive function. How many of us have to stop and think about even everyday matters such as taking a cup to the kettle or taking the kettle to the cup? It's a trivial example perhaps but it's illustrative of the kind of decision-making that one has to make whilst driving. Put

together many executive and motor tasks and you have driving. That's what driving is.

So it is not surprising that the DVLA takes significant interest in our ability to do that. It can come as an unwelcome surprise to people with Parkinson's when the DVLA cancels their existing licence and replaces it with a new licence renewable at their discretion. Typically this can be for one to five years, determined largely by the opinion of your neurologist. If you have a rapidly progressing form of Parkinson's for instance, the DVLA may wish to review your suitability to drive every year. If you are reasonably stable, five years is possible.

Eventually of course there comes a point where the DVLA no longer considers you safe to drive. In a perfect world, you reach that realisation yourself at the same time and the decision of the DVLA is no more than a rubberstamping of your own choice. But that's not the case with everyone. As we know, Parkinson's and the drugs used to treat it can influence judgement in many subtle ways. Sometimes we consider ourselves more able than is actually the case. Sometimes those around us see a different picture. And on those occasions, the DVLA may decide that it's time for you to stop driving.

My licence was up for renewal this week. So it was with some trepidation that I picked up the post from the doormat on Tuesday, noticing the brown envelope from the DVLA. I sat down at the dining room table. There's nothing worse than receiving bad news standing. For perhaps a minute or so, I did nothing. I looked at the envelope and pondered over its contents. Would the letter inside tell me I was still a driver or would it, politely but firmly, tell me that it was time to get a bus pass? I was unusually shaky as I slipped the letter opener under the top of the envelope. I pulled out the letter and placed the letter opener carefully back in its place. I folded the letter flat on the table and slowly and deliberately read its contents. I read it twice before slipping the letter back in its envelope and placing it in the top of the bureau.

I was alone in the house but still said it aloud.

"Five years".

I think I smiled.

See Jon's other blog on driving and applying for a blue badge.