

Simulator helps assess at-risk drivers in Lake Health-Council on Aging collaboration

By Janet Podolak, *The News-Herald*

Wednesday, August 27, 2014

Driving a car is, for most of us, our first act of independence as a teenager and the last one we want to give up as we age.

“Although driving is routine, it’s highly complex and potentially dangerous,” said Lisa Rubin Falkenberg, director of rehabilitation at **Lake Health**.

Impairments from the processes of disease rob some seniors of their ability to safely drive a car, she said.

So a programmable and fully interactive virtual-reality driving simulator is being employed by Lake Health physical and occupational therapists to assess at-risk drivers in a safe, controlled environment. The simulated car, complete with steering wheel, gas and brake pedals and a large computer screen, can take users through 90 different and realistic driving scenarios in diverse road environments.

In place since late April, it’s being used for assessments of geriatric patients, but also proving helpful for retraining those with traumatic brain injuries, stroke and Parkinson’s disease. During a driving evaluation, the simulator measures sensory, perceptual, cognitive, psychomotor and fatigue impairments. It’s then able to create customized training programs based on users’ performance. And it can improve driving skills through training and feedback.

“We’ve had several patients with balance issues who fear dizziness while driving,” said Nancy DiMarino, manager of rehabilitation at TriPoint Medical Center in Concord Township. “They’ve been able to use it to help them get back to tolerating the sensation of movement in a car.” Falkenberg said the simulator has a 135-degree screen so those behind the wheel can see things coming from the side.

“It’s pretty realistic in terms of navigating through traffic conditions, construction zones and areas with pedestrians,” she said.

The driving simulator also has helped stimulate an innovative initiative between Lake Health and the **Lake County Council on Aging**, said Adrienne Green, program coordinator for the latter.

“It was the impetus for our relationship when it became a component of the geriatric assessment program,” she said.

Aging brings a multitude of challenges — physical, mental and emotional, she said.

“We understand how overwhelming it can be for older adults and their families to adapt to the changes that can accompany aging, especially dementia and memory loss,” she said. “Our job is to find people’s strengths and work to build on them. We provide services that allow people to remain safely independent.”

She said the driving simulator can be a great tool for those with the ability to rehabilitate their skills.

“But for those who are not able to rehabilitate, we can help link them to Laketrans services for their transportation needs,” Green said.

Said Lake Health psychologist Lori Stevic-Rust, who is both president of the Lake County Council on Aging and the director of Lake Health’s geriatric services, “I’m passionate about being sure we take a holistic approach to issues of aging, one driven by the patient’s own goals.”

The 85-plus age group is the fastest-growing aging population in Lake County, she said.

“And often our 80-year-olds are caregivers for their 100-year-old parents and have needs of their own. It used to be people felt lucky to make 80,” she said. “Now we’re aging in an entirely different way.”

That makes the partnership between agencies even more important, she said.

“We can’t run parallel programs. We don’t want things dropping through the cracks.”

The recently launched the geriatric assessment program, a collaboration between the two agencies, is much different than the program from 15 years ago.

“That’s because the senior population has changed,” Stevic-Rust said.

Some seniors request an evaluation, while others are referred by family members or a primary care physician. Declines in the ability to make decisions, perform day-to-day activities and comply with medical instructions may first signal the need for an assessment. Other red flags



include memory problems, a depressed mood, repeated falls, general reliance on others for certain needs, self-neglect and weight loss. "We focus on the big picture," said Stevic-Rust. "We tailor a comprehensive plan for each individual."

Experts at work include a board certified internist and geriatrician, clinical health psychologist, social worker, occupational therapist, pharmacist and dietitian.

The outpatient geriatric assessment clinic is inside TriPoint Medical Center's Wellness Institute, where patients are first seen by a physician and psychologist, who may order lab work or radiology services. An occupational therapist completes an in-home safety evaluation, and a social worker gathers information about community, social and family support systems available.

At the second appointment, an interdisciplinary team conference takes place with the patient and his or her family to discuss the evaluation. Recommendations are then provided for follow-up and support. The Lake County Council on Aging has staffers who can help in navigating the maze of senior services available in Lake County, Green said.

Virtual Reality Driving Simulator

Lake Health's TriPoint Medical Center Physician Pavilion

7590 Auburn Road

Concord Township

Cost for a driving assessment is \$350. Insurance might cover the fee for those receiving physical or occupational therapy.

To schedule an assessment, call 440-354-1626, option #2

URL: <http://www.news-herald.com/lifestyle/20140827/simulator-helps-assess-at-risk-drivers-in-lake-health-council-on-aging-collaboration>

© 2014 The News-Herald (<http://www.news-herald.com>)