

Am I becoming a road menace?

I used to skite a bit that I'm a pretty good driver.

I got my licence at 15, mainly by demonstrating to a traffic cop I could do a hill start on Devon St at the Liardet St intersection in New Plymouth, no mean feat in Mum's Morrie Minor, whose clutch was as subtle as Donald Trump.

In effect, that licence was permission to be on the road for the rest of my life, more or less. Nobody has checked on me since, and I've had cause to wonder about that lately.

I got my first-ever ticket the other day for doing 62 up Brooklands Rd on my way to the pub (settle down – I drink low alcohol beer). Worse than that, on another day I ran the back wheel over a low kerb on a tight corner. The question is, am I losing it? Is it time to declare myself a menace and take to walking and public transport?

Incidentally, I rode a bus in New Plymouth recently, the first such venture since I used to catch the tram to school in the 1950s. It was bloody marvellous. I waited five minutes in a well-appointed bus shelter and was then transported in safety and comfort, with good music, from the edge of the city to the CBD in 10 minutes. And it was free (gold card time).

But back to my driving. I have never been in my brother's league when it comes to innate skills. I noticed over the years that photographers have radar that intensifies their powers of observation, their judgement of distances, and speed of reflexes. All the ones I worked with would put racing driver Brendon Hartley to shame, although I'm not sure that's a compliment.

I've managed well enough. Touch wood, no accidents, A to B in quick time, sensible following distances kept, et cetera. But lately I've become slightly tentative, partly because my skeleton has stiffened with age and I can't crane my neck to overcome the ridiculous sightline impediments that dominate modern cars in the name of sleek design.

A backing camera and two sets of warning sensors - whose beeps drive me crazy - serve their purpose, but when I come to an angled intersection with a stop sign, I have trouble seeing past things holding the car roof up, as I try to make sure I'm not pulling out in front of traffic. The blind spot in a merge has grown in size as the years go by, even with the help of adjustable side mirrors.

I've yet to enter the driving hemisphere occupied by some out on the roads in the mornings, when parking is free, and a lot of slow and unseeing cars tootle along with scant regard for their surroundings. But I'm heading that way. I, too, will one day in the foreseeable future be one of the happily unaware who are currently the target of my cursing, me being the superior driver, of course.

I'm not the only one to notice all this. A man in Auckland has been in the news pushing the idea that people should be tested every 10 years. His reasoning is we all need refreshers because cars and traffic density constantly evolve, as ability fades.

I tended to agree with him until I came across a better idea buried at the end of the story. Another expert reckoned standard practical tests have limited use because they examine your ability to follow a set of rules rather than your capacity to handle the stresses and hazardous situations that constantly arise when you're driving.

Knowing the rules is still useful, obviously, but he said there are now simple electronic means to analyse a driver's reactions to emergencies, especially how long it takes to respond to something, skills that are much more important in any overview of driver safety.

That makes sense. It might also detect another largely ignored problem – the onset of age-associated loss of skills. It's not unusual to read news accounts of people who drove through the end of their car garage after mistaking the accelerator for the brake, or had an accident on a road after what appeared to be a sudden health failure. Any one of us may fall prey to that scenario.

Health authorities and the police seem reluctant to interfere, so how long should a family wait before confiscating granddad's or grandmas' keys? Hang on...I'm a grandad - away wit' yis now.