



Improving compliance with medical fitness to drive reviews: The role of behaviourally-optimised letters



Nicholas Faulkner^{a,*}, Bradley S. Jorgensen^a, Jacqui Sampson^b, Eraj Ghafoori^{a,c}

^a BehaviourWorks Australia, Monash Sustainable Development Institute, Monash University, Australia

^b VicRoads, Australia

^c AustralianSuper, Australia

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ABSTRACT

To manage the increased crash risk posed by drivers with medical conditions and impairments, many licensing authorities ask high-risk drivers to undergo medical fitness to drive assessments. Maximising drivers' compliance and satisfaction with these assessments is an ongoing challenge for these authorities. This study tested whether drivers' compliance and satisfaction with a licensing authority's request to provide a medical report could be improved by incorporating two applied behaviour change principles – simplified messaging and procedural fairness – into the authority's request letter. Drivers undergoing medical review ($N = 876$) were assigned to receive either a standard request letter currently used by the authority, or a revised letter that incorporated simplified messaging and procedural fairness amendments. Drivers who received the revised letter were significantly more likely to submit a medical report by the due date. Additionally, of the drivers who submitted the report, those who received the revised letter submitted the report an average of four days faster than those who received the standard letter. These findings demonstrate that optimising letters using behavioural principles can improve compliance with licensing authorities' requests, resulting in substantial time and cost savings for licensing authorities, possible road safety benefits, and potential reductions in the number of licences suspended for failure to provide a report.

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1. Introduction

Driving is a complex activity that requires good physical and mental health. Impairments to visual, cardiac, arthritic, cognitive and neurological abilities increase the risk of motor vehicle accidents (Charlton et al., 2010). To minimise this risk, many licensing authorities have a policy of investigating notifications they receive which alleges that a licence holder may not be medically fit to drive. The first step in this investigative process usually involves sending a standard medical review request letter to the licence holder asking them to undergo a medical examination and return a medical review form. Failure to return the form can lead to licence suspension and cancellation. Yet, despite this possibility, maximising driver compliance with the medical review process is an ongoing challenge for licensing authorities. In Victoria, Australia, only half the drivers who receive a request letter from the licensing authority, VicRoads, comply by the due date.¹

* Corresponding author at: BehaviourWorks Australia, Monash University, 8 Scenic Blvd, Clayton, Victoria, Australia.

E-mail address: nicholas.faulkner@monash.edu (N. Faulkner).

¹ This value was obtained in an analysis of historical VicRoads data conducted prior to the current study.

Requests for medical reports are typically made using standard letters. Although communication via standard letters has a number of benefits (e.g., ensuring consistent communication content, providing clear written records of communications for future reference, and maximising efficiency when dealing with large numbers of clients) it can also come at a cost. Letters from government bodies are often perceived as cold, formal, and lacking in empathy (Murphy, 2003; Wenzel, 2006). Government letters can appear to emphasise 'short, brisk, and authoritarian' messages over communications that try to promote fairness, transparency and respect for individual circumstances and experiences (Wenzel 2006, p. 346; see also Paternoster, 1987). However, research conducted on other types of letters has indicated that such letters can be used to increase compliance with certain types of requests, such as requests to pay taxes (Wenzel, 2006) or fines (Behavioural Insights Team, 2012), and vehicle licensure (Braver et al., 2007; Limrick & Masten, 2014; see Faulkner, Borg, Bragge, et al., in preparation).

Existing research suggests that medical review processes should investigate drivers whose medical fitness to drive has been questioned (Langford & Koppel, 2006), and requesting a medical examination is an integral part of such a process. Maximising the extent to which individuals comply and are satisfied with such requests has several benefits, including time and cost savings for the licensing authority, and fewer suspensions for failure to provide a report, which means fewer individuals are being deprived of their freedom to perform an important daily activity (Fricke & Unsworth, 2001). The letter developed in the current study represents an easy, low-cost technique that licensing authorities could use to improve compliance with driver medical reviews.

1.1. Simplified messaging

The current research investigates whether drivers' compliance and satisfaction with requests to provide a medical report can be increased by optimising the letter using two behavioural principles: simplified messaging and procedural fairness. A great deal of research has investigated the use of simplified messaging and plain language in government communications (Byrne, 2008; Petelin, 2010). In general, the aim of simplified messaging is to ensure that the central message of a document is easily understandable and useable by readers (Petelin, 2010). Several guidelines exist for writing simply to enhance communication and understanding (e.g. Plain Language Action & Information Network, 2011; Securities & Exchange Commission, 1998; Washington State Department of Transportation, 2008). Such guidelines make several recommendations, including: (1) presenting the key message early, ideally in the subject line or first sentence, (2) removing any information that is not absolutely essential to the key message, (3) using personal pronouns, such as 'you' and 'we', and (4) using short, simple words.

Applying the aforementioned recommendations results in several benefits, such as: increasing reader comprehension of message (Byrne 2008; Crawford, 2008; Jones, McDavid, Derthick, Dowell, & Spyridakis, 2012); improving readers' feelings and attitudes towards the author (Jones et al., 2012; Oppenheimer, 2006; Watson & Lynch, 1998); improving customer satisfaction (Miller Bader, 1988; Shilling, Jenkins, & Fallowfield, 2003); and, increasing compliance with instructions (Byrne, 2008; Service et al., 2014). Simplifying medical review letters may similarly increase compliance and satisfaction, but thus far there is a lack of studies in this context.

1.2. Procedural fairness

In addition to implementing plain language, customer compliance and satisfaction with medical request letters may be increased by implementing procedural fairness principles. Procedural fairness is a broad theoretical framework that focuses on the justice and transparency of authorities' decision-making processes, and on how individuals are treated during those processes (Tyler, 1997). Individuals who feel that authorities treat them fairly, transparently, and with respect tend to perceive those authorities as legitimate and are therefore more willing to comply with their requests.

Although no prior research has investigated how procedural fairness principles can be incorporated into medical review request letters, such principles have been used in standard letters trialled by tax authorities to improve compliance (Hartner, Rechberger, Kirchler, & Schabmann, 2008; Murphy, 2005; Wenzel, 2006). In trials with the Australian Taxation Office (ATO), Wenzel (2006) found that incorporating informational and interpersonal justice principles into standard tax-reminder letters significantly increased compliance with requests to file taxation documents on time. A similar trial conducted in Ireland (Doyle, Gallery, & Coyle, 2009) used nearly-identical procedural fairness principles in tax reminder letters and found similar effects on compliance. More generally, research has found that perceived procedural fairness plays an important role in citizens' decisions to comply with the law (Greenberg 1990; Paternoster, Bachman, Brame, & Sherman, 1997; Tyler, 1990), court rulings (Tyler & Mitchell, 1994), and workplace rules (Greenberg, 1994). With the exception of Wenzel (2006) and Doyle et al. (2009), few if any studies have directly investigated how to incorporate procedural fairness messages in standard letters, and no research at all has been conducted on what role procedural fairness plays in driver medical review processes.

1.3. Current research

On the basis of the research outlined above, we identified two hypotheses:

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