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# Equipment can help disabled drivers conquer roads

**I**MAGINE what kind of life you might lead if you lost the physical ability to drive a car. If unable to even board a bus, you'd have to rely on other people to take you to places you needed to go. You'd probably get adept at mooching rides off friends to pick up groceries or visit a doctor. Commuting to a job could present a severe challenge, and spur-of-the-moment trips would be out of the question.

Thousands of disabled people in California face such prospects on a daily basis. However, thanks to the surprising availability of driving aids — collectively referred to as “mobility aids” — many of these folks manage to scoot around in vans and cars in an almost effortless fashion.

“An amazing number of hand controls are put into cars and vans, simply because some people have limited use of their legs,” says John Bates of Emeryville-based Mobility Systems (800-943-7333). “Some people simply can't move their feet fast enough, so we put in a hand control that works the throttle and brakes. It's all on one rod. Pull up on it to apply the gas; push down to apply the brakes.”

Bates went on to explain other modifications to cars that make them easier to drive for individuals who were born with disabilities and those who have recently become disabled because of an illness or accident.

“Some people don't have the strength to turn the steering wheel, or they don't have the range of motion in their wrist to make a full 360-degree sweep,” says Bates. “Once we mount a spinner knob, they

## Dr. Roadmap

**DAVID RIZZO**

can keep their hand in one position and the knob spins the wheel.”

The ability of today's driving systems to meet the needs of disabled drivers hardly ends at rods and spinners, though.

“We are certified to do electronic driving control systems, where you can have full control of your vehicle, including steering, from a joystick,” says Terry Barton, the general manager of the Ability Center in Stanton (714-890-8262). “We even have voice command modules to assist with secondary driving controls such as air conditioning, heating, and radio.”

“We often work in conjunction with independent driving rehab evaluators,” continues Barton. “What happens is that a recently injured person will visit an evaluator, who will give them a list of needed equipment, and then we build a vehicle around those parameters.”

One such qualified evaluator is Sandra Okada, an occupational therapist at the Driving Program at Rancho Los Amigos Hospital in Downey (562-401-7081).

**EVAN JOE** displays the Allview Mirror that helps drivers who have trouble turning their neck to check traffic.

“We train people with physical disabilities and help determine what is the most appropriate mobility aid for them,” says Okada. “The most important thing is for the driver to get evaluated by a hospital-based program because we can try out different equipment, as well as teach them compensatory techniques. For example, if their reaction time is a little slow, we caution them to allow more space between cars.”

“We see a lot of geriatric patients too,” continues Okada. “Their children will bring them in because they are wor-

ried about their decreasing driving skills. Someone who is very kyphotic (severe bending of the upper back) might only need positioning pillows. Some have arthritis in their neck, and they might just need mirrors. It makes them safer on the road.”

One local manufacturer — based in La Puente — offers an easily-mounted, inexpensive mirror that helps motorists, whether disabled or not, to see what's going on behind them. Evan Joe, of Allview Mirror (866-200-8740), explains how his company's mirror helps

drivers who have trouble turning their neck to make a lane change.

“Seeing is one thing, but judging distance is another,” says Joe. “The Allview mirror is aspheric, as opposed to convex, so a motorist obtains a much more accurate view of everything that is going on. This mirror takes into account distance, speed and time, and boils it down to one decision: is it safe to change lanes or not?”

First-hand experience of driving with this mirror proved its worthiness in increasing vision to both sides as well as the rear, even for a person with normal cervical (neck) range of motion. For someone who is truly disabled, tools such as this can help make all the difference between living and “having a life.”

“One of our customers has been driving safely since 1964, even though both legs were amputated,” recalls Mobility System's Bates. “He just bought a brand new vehicle, and we are going to modify it for him with a new set of hand controls. He drives all the time and is still working. For these reasons, I really enjoy this work. It is extremely rewarding when somebody's eyes light up and they say, ‘Now I can take a trip!’”

*Dave (Dr. Roadmap) Rizzo, author of “Freeway Alternates” and former radio traffic reporter welcomes your questions about commuting and traffic. Write to him at Dr. Roadmap, Voices, in care of this newspaper, 1210 N. Azusa Canyon Road, West Covina, CA 91790. E-mail him at [droadmap@pacbell.net](mailto:droadmap@pacbell.net).*