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*Communiqué*

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## **University of Western Ontario researcher to lead national research team ensuring seniors are safe in vehicles**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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London, ON: As Canada's population ages, vehicle safety for elderly drivers and passengers is becoming more important. Injuries due to motor vehicle crashes are the second leading cause of accidental death for the elderly in Canada. Helping to reduce this statistic by evaluating driver re-training programs and enhancing vehicle design is the goal of a national research team being co-led by a University of Western Ontario researcher. Dr. Jan Miller Polgar, an associate professor of occupational therapy is coordinating the multi-disciplinary team, which was recently awarded funding of up to \$338,000 from the AUTO21 Network of Centres of Excellence and several industry supporters. Dr. Michel Bedard of Lakehead University is the project's co-leader. Together, they will work with the team members from the University of Alberta, University of Manitoba, University of Ottawa, University of Waterloo, the University of Windsor, and The University of Western Ontario.

Dr. Miller Polgar says the project is comprised of two components. Researchers will review the effectiveness of driver re-training programs developed for seniors to determine whether such drivers perform better in on-road evaluations than those who don't. "Participation in such programs may help decrease the crash risks for elderly drivers and other road users."

The second component investigates how vehicle design can be enhanced to meet the needs of seniors. Previous studies show seniors have difficulty getting in and out of vehicles, using seatbelts and understanding the visual aspects of instrument panels.

"With the growing number of seniors in Canada, research like Dr. Miller Polgar's is more important than ever," says Dr. Nils Petersen, Western's Vice-President (Research). "We are grateful to the AUTO21 Network of Centres of Excellence for funding this initiative, and for supporting outstanding research at The University of Western Ontario in the Health Sciences area."

"We are pleased to support this innovative project that will enhance the safety of our roads for seniors and other users," says Dr. Peter Frise, CEO and Program Leader of AUTO21. "In addition to the knowledge created, the project provides an excellent training opportunity for nine students at the seven universities to work with expert researchers and also collaborate with industry representatives. This experience will help develop the students into the innovators of Canada's future automotive sector."

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The project is one of seven new research projects worth a total of \$6.5 million being supported by the AUTO21 Network of Centres of Excellence and industry. AUTO21 is a federal program that supports 28 other auto-related R&D projects at 33 universities across Canada, with combined federal and industry funding of more than \$8 million per year. The new projects add 32 researchers and 53 student researchers to the AUTO21 investigative team. Over 250 university and industry researchers, and more than 250 graduate and post-graduate students are already part of the AUTO21 team. AUTO21 is funded through the Networks of Centres of Excellence of Canada program.

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