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A CAR THAT THE BLIND CAN DRIVE PROMPTS THANK YOUS AND WORRIES

March 1, 2011 by JoLynne Lyon

Sachin Pavithran is Assistive Technology Specialist and the Disability Law and Policy Coordinator for the Center for Persons with Disabilities. He gave input into the design of the prototype through the National Federation of the Blind's research and development committee.

What responses do you get when you help create a car that a person who is blind can drive?

Dr. Dennis Hong mostly received thank yous from all over the world. The director of the Robotics and Mechanisms Laboratory at Virginia Tech led a team of 12 undergraduate and 2 graduate students to create a car that could be driven with no vision at all. But in addition to the thank yous he also read some alarmed emails, worrying that the new technology would mean new hazards on the road.

"This is not going to be a real product until it is proven as safe as or safer than a car for sighted people," he said. In the meantime Hong expects spin-off technologies to improve cars driven by sighted drivers; sensors that detect objects in heavy fog, for example.

In the future the technology that allows people who are blind to drive may be as well-developed and accepted as the auto-pilot feature commonly used on planes today—but that day won't come right away.

The Blind Driver Challenge was initiated by the National Federation of the Blind, which wanted a car that could allow a person with visual impairment to drive and make his own decisions. The Virginia Tech team took the challenge and created a car that feeds information to the driver through non-visual interfaces. The CPD's Sachin Pavithran, who in addition to working here also serves on the NFB research and development committee, was one of a team that gave valuable feedback to the researchers. They helped the students understand what would and would not work, and why.

The result made a successful run in late January, during a pre-race demonstration in Daytona.

"This is another breakthrough in the field of assistive technology for the blind. It indicates that blindness could be overcome if the right tools and skills have been obtained," Pavithran said.

You can find more information about the prototype car in the CPD's February Newsletter.