

A dangerous mix: using cellular phones in moving vehicles

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I live dangerously. I tempt fate on a daily basis. Who am I? I am not a professional stuntman. I don't fight fires. I'm not even taking Vioxx for arthritis. I am a bicycle commuter. I pedal to work.

Why is my form of transportation so dangerous? Well, living in Dallas doesn't help. Here, bicycle paths are far outnumbered by our vast roadway system. It also doesn't help that so many of the cars around

me are 6000-pound SUVs. Or that the minimum driving age is 16, or even younger if a neophyte driver can establish a "hardship." But none of these factors is the true source of my peril. I live dangerously because I share the road with drivers talking on cellular phones.

Many drivers have been using their cell phones on the road for quite some time now. But it still terrifies and angers me every time I see a driver using one. It is common sense that drivers focused on a call are not focused on the commuters around them, including me. If common sense isn't enough, there is compelling research. A 1997 study published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* found that a driver talking on a cell phone was four times more likely to be involved in an automobile accident, an increase in risk comparable to that caused by driving at the legal limit of alcohol intoxication. This increased risk occurred for drivers using both hands-free and handheld cell phones. The key factor was not what the drivers' hands were doing but whether their attention was focused on the call or on the road (1, 2). A 2003 study published in the journal *Accident Analysis and Prevention* found that drivers using cell phones reacted up to 4/10ths of a second later during a crucial driving maneuver, depending on the driver's age and gender (3). On the road, where every split second counts, that's a lot of time.

With all of this evidence, why do we still allow drivers to use cell phones while they drive? Clearly the cell phone industry shoulders a good part of the blame. Its army of lobbyists will fight any safety legislation aggressively, no matter how sensible it may be (4–6). But even in America, land of the personal injury attorney, we can't put all the blame on someone else. We have been so seduced by the convenience of talking while

driving that we are unwilling to face the consequences of our own actions.

One of my relatives is a prime example of this willful ignorance. A salesperson, he spends so much time on his cell phone that I think I've forgotten what he looks like without it hanging from his ear. He argues that he would not work as efficiently if he did not use his cell phone while he is on the road. I don't doubt that this is true. But since when is it acceptable to place productivity above safety? What would we think of an airline pilot arguing how much more productive he would be if he could just dispense with all those tedious preflight checks and get the plane in the air? I'm sure my father, a surgeon, would be much more productive if he wore a telephone headset and consulted with patients while he was operating. But the patient under his knife would probably be quite upset if he did not receive all of my father's attention. Do I not deserve the same level of concentration from my relative and his fellow drivers when they share the road with me? With all that we now know about the dangers of talking on a cell phone while driving, how can his productivity argument possibly hold water?

Prior to the 1970s, most states treated drunk drivers with considerable laxity. It took decades of disaster and the advent of groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving for us to realize that we could not stand by while fellow drivers drank and drove (7, 8). I have no doubt that we will eventually reach the same conclusion about using a cell phone while driving. Just as what happened with driving while intoxicated, there will come a time when using a cell phone while driving will be considered morally and legally unacceptable. But how many accidents will have to occur before we as a society come to this collective realization? How many people will be killed or maimed? How much property damage will occur? How much longer will I have to tempt fate?

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