

Cell phone use and driving—the end of an era

It has been a long process, it's been a controversial topic—especially among physicians—but it's also a topic whose time has come. What I'm talking about here is cell phone use and driving legislation. I, along with the premier and the solicitor general, made the public announcement last month in Victoria. In the next few months there will be a ban on all hand-held mobile devices while driving, no texting at all while driving, and zero tolerance in the use of hand-held and hands-free mobile devices while driving for those in the Graduated Driver Program.

Logically, we know this makes sense. Anything that distracts the driver increases the risk of getting injured or causing a collision. The cell phone and driving laws being implemented around the globe are about being responsible with new technologies. Forty years ago we didn't think twice about jumping in our cars and heading down the road without a seatbelt fastened. Today we know that seatbelts save lives and I hope it will not take 40 years to be able to look back and say, "How did I ever justify driving down the highway with a phone glued to my ear or, even worse, while texting a message?"

But as far as convenience is concerned, the legislation is painful as it interferes with the multi-tasking that our hectic lives dictate. Personally, driving was a time when I made some of those important calls that just didn't get done when I was in the office. A number of us doctors will feel that this legislation is unfair for at least two reasons. First, you may have been doing it for years and haven't had an accident, and second, you have to be available at all times because you are a doctor. Both of these thoughts apply

to me and I am sure to others of you as well. However, the answer is clear, either use a hands-free device or pull over and then answer your pager or your missed call.

Now, the official BCMA position goes further and recommends a ban on hands-free cellular use as well as hand-held while driving. A bit draconian, you might think, but studies have shown it's necessary. A recent review of research on the safety consequences of phoning while driving identified more than 125 studies that found impairments in driving performance from the "cognitive distractions" associated with phone conversations using both hands-free phones and hand-held phones.¹ It's not the act of holding a cell phone to your ear that's distracting, it's the act of talking to a disembodied someone else. A person's brain engages differently in this setting.² As well, cell phone conversations tend to artificially constrict the peripheral awareness as measured by a visual field.³ This suggests that cell phone use while driving can decrease the peripheral visual field, making the driver less aware of surroundings and more susceptible to accidents. Epidemiological studies have found a fourfold increase in the risk of property damage and serious personal injury car crashes associated with cell phone use.⁴ This increase in crash risk was similar for hands-held and hands-free phones while driving.⁵ All these studies show us that using your cellular phone while driving is distinctly more risky than listening to the radio, talking to passengers, and other activities commonly occurring in vehicles.

Drivers' use of hand-held cell phones is illegal in most countries throughout the European Union and in all Australian states. Including

British Columbia, six provinces have banned the use of hand-held cell phones while driving. Alberta and Ontario have legislation in the works, with Ontario's taking effect this fall. Neither Saskatchewan nor New Brunswick is even considering cell phone and driving legislation, nor are the three territories. Six states ban hand-held cell phones and driving, 18 states ban texting and driving, and 21 states have a cell phone ban for novice drivers. No jurisdiction anywhere in the world has a complete ban on cell phone use while driving as all laws currently allow for hands-free use. Perhaps, one day, keeping the cell phone out of reach while driving will become just as commonplace as buckling up.

—Brian Brodie, MD
President

References

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