

Chatting on cellphone behind wheel as dangerous as driving drunk

Nick Lees, Edmonton Journal (2006)

A university study found talking on a cell phone behind the wheel of a vehicle is as dangerous as drunk driving. Numerous experimental studies show using a cell phone reduces reaction time by 20 per cent. And talking on a cell phone while driving increases the crash risk between four and six times. "Cell phone use while driving is potentially becoming most neglected public health epidemic in Canada," says Dr. Louis HUGO Francescutti, a University of Alberta medical professor and an emergency physician at the Royal Alexandra Hospital.

"After some 160 studies, the evidence is in. Why aren't we doing something?"

The physician says hand-free cell phones are no safer and only free up drivers up to do other distracting things." Francescutti, a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada and named one of Alberta's Physicians of the Century during the province's centennial year, says Canada must act soon. "In two or three years, so many people will be using cell phones that it will be considered part of our lifestyle and much more difficult to change," he says. "But a recent study found 65 per cent of Albertans would support a total ban on cell phones. I have a good feeling our government is ready to do something."

The study showing cell phone use was as dangerous as driving while intoxicated was done at the University of Utah. A simulator was used and drivers drove with cell phones, hand-free cell phones and at the legally intoxicated .08 percent alcohol level. "We found a 50 per cent reduction in the processing of visual information when you're driving and talking on a cell phone," said David Strayer of the university's psychology department.

Francescutti is a well-respected advocate for injury prevention, provincially, nationally and internationally. But that's not what he set out to do. He was a general-surgery resident making one of his first rotations in the neurosurgical intensive care unit (ICU) at the U of A Hospital one day when he was confronted by eight unnecessary cases. "An intoxicated young man had tried to scale the Legislature and suffered a brain injury when he fell off," says Francescutti. "Another man had fought with his girl friend and sustained a spinal cord injury when their car left the highway. And a third man, out poaching with a friend, had poked himself in the eye with a rifle when their vehicle hit a bump." The neuro-surgeon with Francescutti said: "Welcome to Alberta. This is what we see every summer weekend'."

Francescutti had graduated with a BSc (honours) in biology at Concordia University in his native Montreal and came to study at the U of A, where he received an MD/PhD. He mulled over the plight of the patients and reasoned the health care system is more interested in treating injuries than preventing them. "The bulk of trauma deaths occur at the scene of the injury and all the treatment in the world isn't going to make a difference," says Francescutti.

He changed medical directions and went on, among many another accomplishments, to found the Injury Prevention Centre at the U of A. Cell-phone use while driving is a prime issue for him. Not only does it often result in death and injury, but it is a significant factor in the \$2 billion annual drain on the province's economy linked to unintentional injuries. (Intentional injuries include assault and suicide.)

"Cell phones have transferred cars into secondary work environments," he says. Six people die and nearly 500 are injured every week in Alberta traffic collisions and evidence shows distraction is responsible for between 25 and 30 per cent of them. And cell phone use while driving is a major distraction. "In Alberta, injuries are the leading cause of death for people under 44 and they kill more youngsters under 19 than all other illnesses combined," says Francescutti.

There is no serious funding to prevent injuries, and yet a spinal cord injury can cost \$200,000 for the first year in hospital. Brain injury over a lifetime can run between \$5 million and \$6 million. "If we were able to reduce unintentional injuries by 50 per cent, we would have enough to fund every post secondary student in the province for three years," says the doctor.

An increasing number of countries, cities and towns are banning the use of cell phones while driving and many others are considering such regulations, says Francescutti. Some 65 countries have a variety of legislation, from total bans to some partly allowing hand-free phone use.

One of Francescutti's initiatives is the Coalition for Cell-Phone Free Driving. So far, he has had seven major Alberta companies sign up to help promote non-use of cell phones in vehicles. "Our policy is that employees SHOULD NOT use cell phones WHILE DRIVING on company time," says Francescutti. "If an employee has to make an emergency call (911), the vehicle must be parked in a safe location."

Employers should know an increasing number of companies are being held responsible for collisions involving employees using cell phones. Judgements in the millions of dollars have been awarded against them on the grounds of negligence. "The best place for a cell phone is in the trunk," says Francescutti. "It can be tough not to glance at a phone when it rings. But a Vancouver company recently produced technology that allows a cell phone in motion to not ring, but automatically takes a voice message." He hasn't seen it yet, but the doctor expects a patient sooner or later to COME into the emergency room with a cell phone implanted in their face as a result of talking on a cellphone while driving and colliding. "Air bags are deployed at 200 kilometers an hour," he says. "The odds are pretty good."

For more information on the Coalition visit www.cellphonefreedriving.com.