Driven to distraction: cellular phones and traffic accidents

Driver-education courses conducted in the 1970s required the audience of prospective drivers to watch a film that placed the viewer behind the wheel of a car for a simulated drive through a generic city. Five minutes into the film most members of the audience (especially those whose life expectancy was 75, not 81) noticed a pretty, blonde woman enter their right peripheral visual field. Seconds later there was a screech, a crunch and a virtual jolt. The take-home message: driver distraction leads to driver error and collision. Keep your hands on the wheel, your eyes on the road and your mind on the drive.

So, the question now arises, does talking on a cellular telephone while driving lead to accidents? It’s an important question: the rate of new cell phone subscriptions in the United States now exceeds the nation’s birth rate. An estimated 15% of drivers in Toronto have cell phones in their cars;2 an estimated 15% of drivers in the United States now exceed the nation’s birth rate.1 An estimated 15% of drivers in Toronto have cell phones in their cars;3 an estimated 15% of drivers in the United States now exceed the nation’s birth rate.1

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A small case–control study comparing the cell phone use of 100 randomly selected drivers (mainly men) who had been involved in a motor vehicle accident with that of 100 controls who had not been in an accident demonstrated that cell phone use for more than 50 minutes a month compared with cell phone use of 50 minutes or less a month statistically increased the risk of having an accident 4-fold.4

Drivers who fail to exercise good judgement must be regulated to do so, for cell phones are just the beginning. Computers, fax machines and DVD screens are also starting to clamor for dashboard space. We need to regulate the use of cell phones and other driver-distracting devices. This is a no-brainer.

References