

TerranearPMC Safety Share

Robert Brounstein

Week of November 4, 2019 – Hands-Free Driving: Is it a Safe Practice?

I remember the very first time I saw someone talking on a mobile phone while driving. It was back in the 1980's when these devices were the size of a shoe box. The woman talking and driving seemed to be a successful business person, driving her Mercedes while appearing to have a wonderful time chatting away while moving along a busy street in Southern California. I couldn't help but be impressed. Maybe one day I'll be able to do that! And within a short time after, movies started depicting scenes where people were speeding along and talking on their mobile devices while making important deals. Two movies that come to mind are "The Morning After" – with Raul Julia driving his jeep (open top) along the Pacific Coast Highway while talking away and Pulp Fiction "Are you talking on one those cellular phones?! I don't know you! Crank caller, CRANK CALLER!"

Years later, smart phones came out and then everyone was talking, texting and sending Instagrams – while driving. And this was happening while one hand was on the wheel and the other hand was tapping away. Meanwhile our eyes were focused, not on the road, but on our important messages like, "where do you want to go tonight?" and "Did you hear that Jim and Carol broke up!?"

Truck drivers can tell us stories of driving during the evening hours whiling getting along side of a sedan or SUV and looking down into vehicles and seeing that green/blue light that emanates from their cell phones while illuminating the interior as drivers are clicking away.

This type of behavior has been coined as "distracted driving." Soon after, the work force noticed that cell phones became prevalent, resulting in field workers dividing their attention between their phones and their assigned work activities. Corporate America began using the term, "distracted behavior," and thus realizing the potential danger of using cellular devices at work. Soon after, companies began to write policies that prohibited the use of cell phone use during work activities.

Meanwhile, to address this situation of distracted driving, Hands-Free devices were developed. Some of these devices were merely smart-phone holders allowing the user to press the "speaker" button and therefore continue conversations while driving. At the same time, automobile manufacturers began to hard-wire connections for a complete hands-free ability to talk on the phone while driving. Drivers could now stay focused on the road with both hands on the wheel. It looked as if a solution for distracted driving was found!

Unfortunately, even with both hand free, ones' attention is still focused on something other than the task at hand; whether that's operating a piece of equipment (such as a punch press or front-end loader) or driving a vehicle. Yes, there has been a concerted effort to stop the physical aspect of using a cell phone while performing another, more critical activity and to promote "hands-free" driving. However, distracted driving is more than just a physical concern as this activity requires our mental focus to be compromised as well.



TerranearPMC Safety Share

Studies have shown that when someone is driving while talking on the phone, they are numb to what they are doing, as well as their surroundings – including how they are affecting their fellow motorists on the road. Whether it's reading a text from our kids, dialing a friend to let them know we were running late, or indulging in a prospective customer's call during rush hour, many times it becomes apparent – after the fact - that talking on the phone can come a barrier between us and the road.

That fact is, while handsfree devices help drivers keep their hands on the wheel, they only make it easier for a driver's mind to devote less than 100% focus on the road. Laws that emphasize that distracted driving is solely a problem that has to do with the physical aspect of holding a device rather than recognizing the compromising circumstance of a mental component are truly reinforcing a dangerous practice. When we talk on the phone, our minds and senses are impeded from focusing on the road. We lose that necessary periphery access that safe driving requires. Making our hands the scapegoat, not our minds, ignores something that is very important. That is, we aren't driving recklessly because we have a soda in their hand. We are doing something dangerous because our minds are elsewhere.

According to the National Safety Council (NSC), every day 9 people are killed, and 1000 people are injured due to distracted driving. The NSC goes on by stating that drivers looking out their windshield can miss up to 50% of all the things that are around them when they engage in cell phone conversations. Another way to look at this situation is based on the understanding that one cannot read a book and drive simultaneously. This prompts the question, "So why would anyone think they can drive while engaged in a conversation.

How many times has a person bumped into us while we were merely walking in a shopping center or in an airport or just walking on the street? What was this person who inadvertently bumped into us doing? Chances are they were talking to a friend or looking at some items on a store shelf and even – quite possibly – talking on the phone; or even just walking with their heads down. Of course, we should be looking ahead. Nevertheless, we all have moments when we are deep in thought and while our eyes are open, our minds are somewhere else. Sound familiar?

The point is, while new devices may come onto the market, regardless of how innovative they may be, if we cannot give 100% of our attention to driving (or performing some other activity) and therefore, fully observe surrounding conditions, the risk of an unfortunate event, will remain at an unacceptable level.

Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past are certain to miss the future - John F. Kennedy

