

Driving while phoning danger as bad as drink-driving

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Motorists who use cellphones while driving make as many, if not more, driving errors as clinically drunk drivers, according to educational psychologist Professor Michael Townsend. He says the proposed ban on hand-held cellphone use by drivers is long overdue.

In an observational study he published two years ago, Professor Townsend found that 4 per cent of the 8700 central Auckland motorists sighted were using cellphones while driving.

He believes the percentage will have risen in line with the increase in cellphone connections.

International research has shown that using a cellphone when driving results in “cognitive overload,” causing the same or higher rates of driver error as a drunk driver, he says.

The risk of collision is four times greater when driving while using a cell phone, while the risk of a collision resulting in death is nine times higher.

"While 4 per cent might not sound sufficient to justify a ban, people can better comprehend the level of danger by imagining – as they drive home on a busy motorway – that one in every 25 cars coming towards them is being driven by a clinically drunk driver."

Concentrating on a conversation, not simply the physical act of holding a

cell phone, is what distracts the driver. "The nature of the conversation matters too, with deep and meaningful dialogues creating a greater distraction and added risk than small talk."

Professor Townsend admits to having been won over by cellphones having ardently refused to carry one until three months ago.

He says he can now understand the compulsion to answer a cell phone call when driving because he has done so himself. He even admits to having sent a text message while in a line of slow-moving traffic.

"A ban would act as a deterrent for many people whose inclination to use a cell phone while driving prevails over common sense and self-preservation."

Between 2002 and last year there were 411 injury crashes and 26 fatal crashes in which the use of cell phones were implicated.

Source: Massey University

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