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Driven to distraction

You say goodbye to your children as they prepare to go out for the evening:

“Don’t forget to smoke a couple of joints before driving in the snow tonight.”

“Grandma, Grandpa, it was great seeing you for the Holidays. To make sure you safely make it home, let’s share a few cocktails before you hit the road.”

“Hi, honey. I should be home in 15 minutes if this traffic doesn’t kill me.”

I suspect few of us would suggest our children or grandparents drive while impaired. But I bet a lot more you have had a cellular conversation while navigating the rush hour. And most of us take solace that our kids carry a cell phone in case of emergency.

But did you know that according to a recent study, “the impairments associated with using a cell phone while driving can be as profound as those associated with drinking and driving”?¹

It’s time we recognize this important public health hazard. A recent review concluded that cellular phone users had a four-fold risk of a “property-damage-only crash,” and this risk was increased regardless of age, gender, or use of a hands-free phone.² Moreover, while bans on cellphone use have an initial salutary effect, there is a rapid decline in compliance without regular enforcement and publicity.³

It’s certainly odd to see a well-groomed and seemingly sane businessman gesticulating wildly on a downtown street. It’s bad enough that you can’t even go into the airport restroom or a fine restaurant without the constant cacophony of cellular conversation. But amusement turns to horror as a car full of teens, radio blaring, weaves through traffic or a bleary-eyed commuter blithely converses while applying her makeup and juggling her latte.

While I don’t have the ultimate solution to cellular commotion, we should be counseling our patients about this public health hazard. Driven to distraction could mean a detour to death.

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