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[GUEST VIEWPOINT: Hands-free cell phones don't address the real safety issue](http://www.registerguard.com/csp/cms/sites/web/opinion/16285166-47/story.csp)
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The Oregon Senate and House took a step in the right direction by passing legislation banning the use of hand-held mobile phones by motorists. However, this well-intentioned law does not go far enough and might even send an incorrect message about the safety of driving while using a hands-free device.

The problem is simple: Despite common intuitions, research in psychology shows that hands-free cell phones are as distracting to drivers as hand-held cell phones.

Although holding a phone occupies one of the driver's hands, engaging in a conversation on the phone with someone who is not in the car occupies too much of the driver's mind. Most people can drive with only one hand. No one can drive safely without a mind fully available to respond to danger.

Why are both hand-held and hands-free cell phones such a problem for safe driving? The problem is the person on the other end of the call is likely to demand the driver's attention at the wrong moment. Just as that truck is veering toward the driver, the person on the other end of the cell phone is describing his divorce while demanding an empathic response, or asking for information while insisting on a reply, or communicating a complaint and requiring an apology. In each of these cases the person speaking at the other end of the line is oblivious to the immediate demands on the driver, while making his or her own demands.

In contrast, an alert passenger in the car adjusts his or her conversational demands depending on driving conditions. An alert and mature passenger can even improve safety by pointing out oncoming dangers. This is not so surprising: the passenger's safety is at stake in a moving car, and the passenger has information about the situation. However, a person talking to a driver via cell phone is not put at risk by the driver's behavior and has essentially no information about the driving situation.

In other words, the real problem with cell phones when driving is not about the physical phone, and it is not even about having a conversation. Rather, it is about the fact that the person on the other end of the call has essentially no information about the second-to-second conditions confronting the driver.

While banning hand-held devices might do some good by reducing cell phone use while driving, a danger in legislation such as Oregon's is in giving the false impression to drivers that hands-free devices are safe. Oregon needs to educate the public and enact a full ban on cell phone use while driving.

The research about cell phone danger is clear. Hands-free devices are as dangerous as hand-held devices when used by a driver. For these reasons the National Safety Council has called for a ban on all cell phone use while driving. Oregon should follow this good advice and base its laws on sound research. To do less is to risk human lives.

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