



**Alberta Medical Association
Submission to
Standing Committee on the Economy**

**Bill 204
*Traffic Safety (Hand-Held Communication Devices)
Amendment Act, 2008***

August 22, 2008

Executive Summary

The Alberta Medical Association has called for the Provincial Government to address the issue of driver distraction, specifically the use of cell phones while driving. We are in favor of a total ban on cell phone use while driving. We welcome, however, Bill 204 and a ban on hand-held devices as an important first step toward a possible future, more comprehensive ban.

Why cell phone use while driving is unsafe

There is an increasing body of scientific evidence that cell phone use interferes with a driver's ability to drive safely, i.e., with due attention and concentration. For example:

- Collision risk is four-to-six-times higher for drivers using cell phones
- Using a cell phone while driving slows reaction speed by 18%
- The increased risk of collision is equivalent to driving with a blood alcohol level at the legal limit
- Drivers using cell phones are more likely to miss a red light and 10 times less likely to make a full stop at a stop sign
- Text messaging causes up to a 400% increase in time spent with eyes off the road and a 140% increase in incorrect lane changes

To consider the effects of cell phone use on drivers, readers may wish to review the four-minute video clip available at <http://www.stimulant.ca/suddenstopexcerpts/Welcome.html>. Watch a young driver's skills deteriorate during a simulation when provided with a cell phone. Then view a brief interview with the widow of an Albertan killed while using a cell phone at the wheel. *(To view the video, you would need Adobe Reader 7 or a more recent version. Alternatively, paste the link into your web browser.)*

Impact on the health care system

Half of Alberta drivers report cell phone use while driving and the proportion of drivers using cell phones has nearly doubled in fewer than 10 years. "The use of mobile phones is associated with an increased likelihood of serious road crashes resulting in hospital attendance."

Alberta currently spends over one-third of its provincial program dollars on health care. By reducing injury and resulting care costs, a ban on cell phones while driving not only lowers costs. It is also consistent with the Alberta Health and Wellness' 2008-11 business plan that calls for "strategies and policies for enhancing human health and safety and for reducing the risk of disease and injury."

Public support

While there are certainly other factors in the realm of driver distraction that are difficult to address, the evidence against the use of cell phones is so compelling as to require action. As physicians, we often find the best course of action is to treat the patient's primary problem with the best options currently available – even when there are additional concerns for which we do not immediately have an answer.

Surveys show strong support among Albertans for a ban – at the same time as they continue to use cell phones while driving. The AMA believes there is a fundamental resistance to behavior change here that warrants a statutory solution.

Conclusion

The prevalence of cell phone and other hand-held communication devices in our society will only increase in the years ahead. A ban under Bill 204 will not only save lives, but also communicate expected social behavior and norms – and tangibly promote a vision of a culture of safety on the roads and highways of Alberta.

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Introduction

The Alberta Medical Association (AMA) represents nearly 9,000 physicians, medical residents and medical students, standing as an advocate organization to provide leadership and support for the physician's role in the provision of quality health care.

For more than 25 years the AMA has been involved in traffic safety issues including: seatbelt legislation, baby car seats, graduated drivers licenses and all terrain vehicle use by children.

Now that cell phone use while driving has become a focal point for public debate, the AMA welcomes the opportunity to provide input. Every day, physicians see in our offices and hospitals the grim evidence of unsafe driving practices. It is time to take action.

Background

At its March 2007 meeting, the AMA's governing body, the 119-physician delegate Representative Forum, passed the following resolution:

That the AMA supports the Province of Alberta Traffic Safety Initiative and calls for the government to address the issue of driver distraction, specifically the use of cell phones while driving.

Although the AMA resolution calls for prevention of the use of any cell phone technology while driving, Bill 204 proposes only to restrict the use of hand-held devices.

The AMA believes there should be a complete ban for both hands-free and hand-held devices. Multiple studies have shown that hands-free devices are not safer than hand-held. We recognize, however, that issues such as these often evolve incrementally. Accordingly, we applaud the implementation of a hand-held ban as an all-important first step.

Why cell phone use while driving is unsafe

The 2004 *Alberta Traffic Safety Progress Report* stated that "the leading causes of collisions in Canada include driver distraction, inattention and improper lookout, contributing to 20% to 50% of all collisions."

There is an increasing body of scientific evidence that cell phone use interferes with a driver's ability to drive safely, i.e., with due attention and concentration. The evidence underscores the need for public policy measures to manage cell phone use by drivers.

- Collision risk is four-to-six-times higher for drivers using cell phones. (Bellavance, 2005)
- National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) data on safety implications of wireless communication in vehicles found that driver distraction is responsible for 25% to 30% of collisions.
- Using a cell phone while driving slows reaction time by 18%. (Strayer, Drews, 2004)
- The increased risk of a collision while using a cell phone is similar to the hazard associated with driving with a blood alcohol level at the legal limit. (*Alberta Traffic Safety Progress Report, 2004*).
- Intersections are one of Alberta's traffic safety priorities. Drivers using cell phones are more likely to miss a red light and 10 times less likely to make a full stop at a stop sign. (Strayer, 2001, 2005).
- Text messaging, a new dimension to this problem, affects safety-critical driving skills, causing up to a 400% increase in time spent with eyes off the road and 140% increase in incorrect lane changes. (Hosking et al, 2006)

To consider the effects of cell phone use on drivers, readers may wish to review the four-minute video clip¹ available at <http://www.stimulant.ca/suddenstopexcerpts/Welcome.html>. Watch a young driver's skills deteriorate during a simulation when provided with a cell phone. Then view a brief interview with the widow of an Albertan killed while using a cell phone at the wheel. (*To view the video, you would need Adobe Reader 7 or a more recent version. Alternatively, paste the link into your web browser.*)

Impact on the health care system

The Population Research Lab in 2007 stated that half of Alberta drivers report cell phone use while driving. Since the proportion of drivers using cell phones has already nearly doubled in fewer than 10 years (Traffic Injury Research Foundation, 2007), it is a problem that will keep growing.

Studies on the potential impact on the health care system of higher collision risk associated with cell phone use are virtually non-existent. A 2005 article, however, published in the prestigious *British Medical Journal* reaches the eminently logical conclusion that: "use of mobile phones is associated with an increased likelihood of serious road crashes resulting in hospital attendance." (McEvoy et al, 2005)

¹ Excerpted from *Sudden Stop*, produced by Alberta Community Media, a full-length documentary focused on the dangers of careless driving. The 2005 production was sponsored by numerous stakeholders including Alberta Transportation and the Alberta Medical Association.

As steward of the province's finances, the Alberta government invests heavily in many worthy health promotion and injury prevention activities. Reducing the number of crashes on Alberta's highways is a sensible – and very defensible – extension of such a role.

Alberta currently spends over one-third of its provincial program dollars on health care. By reducing injury and resulting care costs, a ban on cell phones for drivers not only lowers costs. It is also consistent with the Alberta Health and Wellness 2008-11 business plan that calls for “strategies and policies for enhancing human health and safety and for reducing the risk of disease and injury.”

Public support for regulating cell phone use

According to a 2007 survey from the Coalition for Cell Phone-Free Driving (a group supported by the University of Alberta's School of Public Health and the Alberta Public Health Association), 74% of Albertans support legislation to make use of cell phones illegal while driving. That being said, here are some comments regarding arguments commonly used by those who might oppose a ban.

The range of driver distractions

Some point out that cell phone use is only one of a range of driver distractions, some of which may be even more dangerous.

We counter, however, that other distracting behaviors (eating, reading, etc.) are self-initiated and not encouraged by a prompt from an outside source such as the tempting ring of an incoming call or text message.

While there are certainly other factors in the realm of driver distraction that are difficult to address, the evidence against the use of cell phones is so compelling as to require action. As physicians, we often find the best course of action is to treat the patient's primary problem with the best options currently available – even when there are additional concerns for which we do not immediately have an answer.

Education vs. legislation

Some believe that education and awareness are better tools for public policy than legislation and more effective in the long run.

Surveys confirm, though, that although Albertans generally recognize the dangers of using a cell phone while driving, they continue to do it. The AMA believes there is a fundamental resistance to behavior change here that warrants a statutory solution.

The fervor of the debate is reminiscent of the one that occurred years ago around mandatory seatbelts. Countless lives have been saved by those seatbelts – restraints used because of a level of behavior change that only a new law could invoke.

Enforcement

Still others point to cell phone bans in other jurisdictions and argue they have not been effective because they require public education and are intensive to enforce. There is nothing here that Alberta has not already learned in other traffic safety measures (speeding, impaired driving) or other public health issues such as tobacco control. Albertans understand the risks, but they will not change their behavior unless there are penalties for breaking a law, e.g., fines, demerits.

An interesting evaluation of legislation in Japan suggests that collisions associated with cell phone use fell by 50% (an overall 20% reduction in collisions) after a ban was introduced in December 1999 (cited by the Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2008).

Again, as physicians we seize on effective, simple treatments that work one patient at a time, trusting that over time the health of the population will improve and we will learn how to do other things even better.

Conclusion

Accelerating uptake of cell phone technology by Albertans has brought us to a point where legislation is required. The AMA believes that in the long run, public desire to travel safely (not to mention distaste for increasing carnage on the roads) will win out over perceived convenience and entertainment value from use of a cell phone at the wheel.

The recent surge of technological advances promises an increasingly central role for mobile devices and cell phones in our society. The exploding popularity of text-based communication poses a grave threat due to the increased time spent with eyes off the road and one hand on the wheel.

Through a ban on the use of cell phones while driving, the Alberta government not only saves lives. You will also communicate expected social behavior and norms – and tangibly promote a vision of a culture of safety on the roads and highways of this province.

A ban on the use of hand-held cell phones while driving has the full support of the Alberta Medical Association.



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CITATIONS

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