Texting on Mobile Phones While Driving: Duhhh

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Alyssa Burns was driving on Iowa Country Road 800N on June 25, 2009. The 17 year old was a good student and was popular among her schoolmates. She was also driving in the wrong lane while she was texting a conversation on her mobile phone – and had not buckled her seat belt – when she swerved into the ditch and died. http://desmoines.injuryboard.com/automobile-accidents/fatal-choice-texting-while-driving.aspx?googleid=265820

Nicholas Sparks, 25, was driving his tow truck and “using two cell phones — texting on one and talking on another — when he crashed into a car, drove through a fence and into a house before finally ending up in a swimming pool….”< http://www.automotive-fleet.com/News/Story/2009/07/Texting-Tow-Truck-Driver-Lands-in-Swimming-Pool.aspx

If driving while talking on a mobile phone is dangerous, as I have discussed in two previous columns, how can anyone doubt that texting while driving is insanely dangerous?

The law firm of Edgar Snyder & Associates has an extensive series of pages on car accident statistics that discuss texting while driving< http://www.edgarsnyder.com/car-accident/cell/statistics.html > and provide links to news reports and primary sources. Some of their observations are horrifying. For example, some key points from their summary of a Virginia Tech Transportation Institute study include

- A car driver dialing a cell phone is 2.8 times more likely to get into a crash than a non-distracted driver.
- A truck driver texting while driving is 23.2 times more likely to get into an accident than a trucker paying full attention to the road.
- A truck driver dialing a cell is 5.9 times more likely to crash.
- For every 6 seconds of drive time, a driver sending or receiving a text message spends 4.6 of those seconds with their eyes off the road. This makes texting the most distracting of all cell phone related tasks.

Adult drivers are pretty stupid about texting, report the attorneys:

- One-fifth of experienced adult drivers in the United States send text messages while driving.
- A study of dangerous driver behavior released in January 2007 by Nationwide Mutual Insurance Co. found that of 1,200 surveyed drivers, …. 19 percent of motorists say they text message while driving.
- The majority of Americans believe that talking on the phone and texting are two of the …most dangerous behaviors that occur behind the wheel. Still, as many as 81% of drivers admit to making phone calls while driving.
- The number of crashes and near-crashes linked to dialing is nearly identical to the number associated with talking or listening. Dialing is more dangerous but occurs less often than talking or listening.
- Studies have found that texting while driving causes a 400 percent increase in time spent with eyes off the road.
However, teen drivers, with their incompletely myelinated frontal lobes and consequent impulse-control and planning deficits, are worse:

- Despite the risks, the majority of teen drivers ignore cell phone driving restrictions.
- In 2007, driver distractions, such as using a cell phone or text messaging, contributed to nearly 1,000 crashes involving 16- and 17-year-old drivers.
- Over 60 percent of American teens admit to risky driving, and nearly half of those that admit to risky driving also admit to text messaging behind the wheel.
- Each year, 21% of fatal car crashes involving teenagers between the ages of 16 and 19 were the result of cell phone usage. This result has been expected to grow as much as 4% every year.
- Almost 50% of all drivers between the ages of 18 and 24 are texting while driving.
- Over one-third of all young drivers, ages 24 and under, are texting on the road.
- Teens say that texting is their number one driver distraction.

So based on common sense, it’s obvious, right? We should simply pass and enforce laws to ban texting while driving.

Well, it’s not so simple. In the next column, I’ll look at some of the issues raised by trying to stop “driving while intexticated” using the legal system alone.

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