

## Distracted Drivers

By Charlie McBriarty

While driving have you ever encountered someone in the car ahead driving in an erratic manner? Surely I am not alone. Anyone who has driven in either direction along NC 58 has followed a car whose driver appears to be looking for a street. They typically travel well below the posted speed limit, slowing at every corner. If you are lucky, they find the road within four or five slowdowns. There doesn't seem to be any time of day or season of the year that this type of driver can be avoided, but they are definitely out and about in greater numbers between Memorial Day and Labor Day. How about early morning drivers who are running a little late on their trips to the office? To make up for lost time, they finish getting ready by applying make-up, checking their hair in the rearview mirror or apparently reading something placed on the passenger seat. Then there is the driver with a cell phone. Recently, I saw a classic example. The driver had a cell phone tightly clutched to one ear, an upsized soft drink in the hand "holding" the steering wheel and a lit cigarette drooping from the lips. These are but three examples of distracted drivers.

Each of us can likely identify many other examples.

A distraction is defined as any activity that has the potential of diverting a person's attention from his or her primary job of driving. Actually there are three categories of distractions that can impinge on all drivers: visual distraction, taking your eyes off the road; manual distraction, taking your hands off the wheel; and cognitive distraction, taking your mind off your driving. All distractions increase the risk of becoming involved in an accident. Research on distracted driving from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and other agencies has revealed the following facts:

- 20% of injury crashes in 2009 involved distracted driving.
- During that same year, 5,474 people were killed and approximately 448,000 more were injured in accidents involving distracted drivers.
- 16% of all drivers under 20 years of age in fatal crashes involved distracted drivers.

Of those killed in distracted-related crashes, 995 involved reports of the cell phone as the distraction.

Drivers using handheld cell phones are four times as likely to get involved in accidents serious enough to injure themselves.

Finally, according to a University of Utah study, the use of a cell phone, whether handheld or hands-free, while driving delays a driver's reaction time as much as having a blood alcohol concentration of .08 percent—the legal limit.

The ubiquitous cell phone has been found to be a significant source of driver distraction leading to accidents involving not only property damage but also injury and death. Many states have addressed the distracted driver issue by enacting cell phone and texting laws. California, Connecticut, Delaware, New Jersey, New York, Oregon and Washington prohibit the use of handheld cell phones by the driver and provide that an officer may cite a driver for using a handheld device without any other traffic offense taking place. Maryland and Utah also prohibit drivers' use of handheld cell phones but only after the driver is cited for another violation.

Texting while driving has generated greater concern since it involves all of three types of distraction—visual, manual and cognitive. Thirty states, including North Carolina, have enacted laws prohibiting texting while driving.

The use of handheld cell phones are still permitted for most drivers of North Carolina highways; however, teen driv-

ers and school bus drivers are prohibited the use of either handheld or hands-free devices. The current session of the North Carolina General Assembly has bills in both the House and Senate that deal with additional distracted driving laws including imposing further restrictions on drivers' use of cell phones.

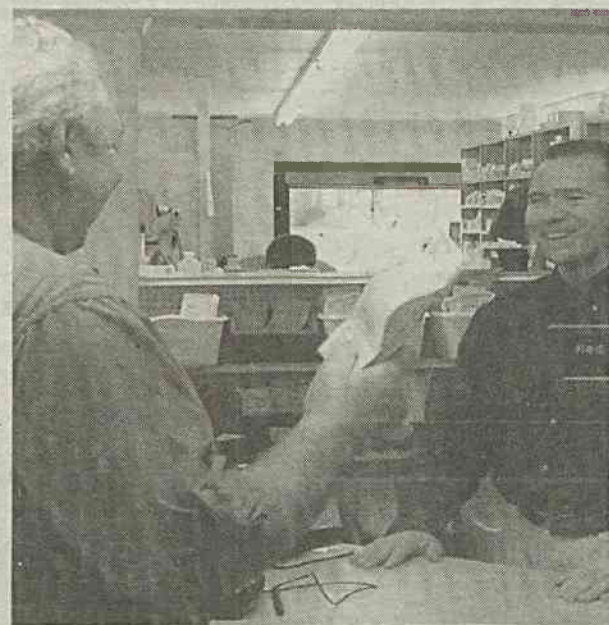
It is clear that using a cell phone while driving can be a distraction that may result in an accident, but having a cell phone in the car can be very useful should an emergency present itself. Most states, including North Carolina, use 911 for emergencies but the high volume of calls the 911 operators receive have led many states to have a special cell phone number to report highway and vehicle related problems. The two most common of these numbers are \*SP (\*77) for the State Police or \*HP (\*47) for the Highway Patrol. These numbers are designed to handle a series of problems including vehicle breakdowns, accidents, hazardous material spills and reporting impaired, aggressive or reckless drivers. The states using these special cell phone numbers have signs erected along major highways. In North Carolina the number is \*HP (\*47) for cell phones or 800-662-7956.

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