Mobile phone use & distraction

• Using a mobile phone whilst driving is highly distracting and increases your risk of a crash four-fold, regardless of whether a hands-free kit is used.¹²,¹³

• Despite the dangers and illegality, approximately 61% of drivers have admitted to using their mobile phone to either talk or text.²⁶

The Facts

• Driver distraction, including mobile phone use, is one of the main causes of road crashes, accounting for approximately 1 in 4 car crashes.¹

• Approximately 84% of mobile phone users own a smartphone. The greater functionality of smartphones (e.g. social media, internet) means they have the greater potential to distract a driver. A NSW survey of 415 drivers found that 68% had read emails and 25% had updated their Facebook status or tweeted.⁴

• Young drivers aged 18 to 25 years are twice as likely to make a phone call and four times more likely to text and they are more likely to read emails or use the internet. In addition, 12% have admitted to updating their Facebook status while driving and 14% have admitted to taking a selfie and uploading it while driving.⁵

• Talking to a passenger is less distracting than talking on a mobile phone. If a dangerous situation develops, the passenger can stop talking to allow the driver to concentrate. On a mobile phone, the other person is unaware of the danger and will continue talking, distracting the driver further when full concentration is required to drive safely.⁶,⁷

Australian legislation

• It is illegal in all Australian states and territories to use a hand-held mobile phone while driving; including when your vehicle is stationary but not parked (e.g. when stopped at a traffic light). This includes talking, texting, playing games, taking photos or video and using other phone functions.

• It is illegal to use a hands-free phone while driving if it causes you to lose proper control of your vehicle.

• In some States, learner, P1 and P2 drivers are not permitted to use a hand-held or hands-free mobile phone while driving.⁸

It is inattention rather than manual dexterity that is a crucial factor in increasing the risk of a crash whilst using a mobile phone.¹⁵,¹⁶,¹⁷

Why is using a mobile phone while driving dangerous?

• Using a mobile phone while driving is distracting in the following ways:
  ° Physical distraction – as the driver’s hand is moved from the steering wheel to pick up the phone, answer or end the call, or text a message;
  ° Visual distraction – as the driver’s eyes are diverted from the road to seek the phone, view the buttons, read a message, etc.; and
  ° Cognitive distraction - talking on a mobile phone while driving causes lapses of attention, concentration and judgement, as the driver’s attention is divided between the driving task and conversation.

• It is difficult to have a simple conversation at night and in wet weather. Similarly, it is difficult to have a complex conversation whilst performing a simple driving task as the conversation task demands a greater investment of the driver’s attention.

• Text messaging while driving is especially dangerous. An Australian simulator study found that young novice drivers spent about four times as much time looking away from the road when texting than when not texting.⁹

• Research shows that dialling, texting and talking on a mobile phone while driving can lead to:
  ° Riskier decision making – a driver’s ability to judge distances, speed, space and environmental conditions may be affected;
  ° Slower reactions;¹⁰,¹¹
  ° Less controlled braking – the driver will tend to brake later, with more force and less control;¹²
  ° Inappropriate actions at the onset of a yellow light at intersections;¹³ and
  ° Reduced awareness of the surroundings: the driver will tend to spend less time checking their mirrors and monitoring the traffic and road environment.

Crash risk

• Anyone using a mobile phone while driving is at increased risk of a serious crash.

• Data from naturalistic driving studies¹ suggest that:
  ° talking, listening and/or dialing a hand-held device accounted for 7% of the total crashes and near crashes (3.6% each);
  ° inattention in the broader sense has been found to be a contributing factor in 78% of car crashes and 65% of near crashes.

• Young drivers are particularly at risk as there is a greater prevalence of driving while using a mobile phone in this age group.

• Older drivers find it difficult to conduct two tasks simultaneously and their response times are impaired.

State of the Road A Fact Sheet of the Centre for Accident Research & Road Safety - Queensland (CARRS-Q)
Further comparisons of the levels and technological interventions to tackle the effects of different types of hands-free and handheld mobile phone conversations tend to be similar for reaction time, speed selection, gap acceptance and braking behaviour of drivers, suggesting inattention rather than manual dexterity is a crucial factor.  

Effects of hands-free and handheld mobile phone conversations need to be further examined in regard to road safety. VicRoads (2016) note that drivers were more likely to commit traffic violations when they were engaged in hands-free calls. Drivers who believe they can control the footpath (even when stopped at a red light). Pull over safely & park your vehicle before using your mobile phone.

ocket phone conversations impair the speed selection, acceleration, deceleration and headway distance of drivers during car-following; braking can be abrupt or aggressive; and responses to traffic light changes can be delayed.  

Effects of hands-free and handheld mobile phone conversations tend to be similar for reaction time, speed selection, gap acceptance and braking behaviour of drivers, suggesting inattention rather than manual dexterity is a crucial factor.  

References  
5. AAMI. (2015). AAMI targets social stigma to tackle distracted driving.  