

# OUR VIEW

23 MAR 07

By The Tribune Editorial Board

## Cell phone death toll

### Utah should outlaw driving while phoning

**Y**ou may have noticed an impromptu memorial earlier this week at the intersection of 2100 South and 1300 East in Salt Lake City. It marked the location where 17-year-old Lauren Mulkey died in a traffic accident early Sunday morning.

She suffered fatal injuries when the westbound sport utility vehicle she was driving was struck in the intersection by a northbound car whose driver had run a red light. The 19-year-old driver of that other car told police he was distracted because he was talking on his cell phone and searching for an address.

Statistics on fatal accidents caused by drivers whose attention was diverted by a cell-phone conversation are hard to come by, but anecdotal evidence is mounting. Drivers whose minds are not on the road because their heads are on the phone are a menace to public safety.

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Lauren Mulkey was not a statistic. She was a young woman with dreams of entering Westminster College after her early graduation from East High School.

Grant and Janell Hardy weren't statistics, either. Husband and wife, ages 72 and 71, they died in 2001 of injuries they suffered when a woman took her eyes off the road to answer her cell phone and ran a red light at 1300 South and Foothill Boulevard in Salt Lake City. The Hardys were in the car struck by the woman driver.

These deaths were not enough to persuade the Utah Legislature last month to make it illegal to talk on the phone while driving. They did pass a new law prohibiting careless driving, defined as committing a moving violation other than speeding while being distracted. The distractions include using a cell phone, but the law exempts talking on hands-free models.

That legislation is worthless because, as University of Utah research has shown, it is the distraction of the brain, not just the use of hands, that causes "inattention blindness."

The lawmakers also debated a bill to ban teenage drivers from phoning, but didn't pass the bill. One lawmaker wondered aloud whether that bill could lead to a ban on adults using phones while driving.

Another lawmaker, Rep. Chris Herrod, R-Provo, whined, "It can be seductive to say I can save some lives here and save some lives there, but you have to remember that you are taking away someone's freedom."

What about Lauren Mulkey's freedom, Rep. Herrod?