

They offer flexibility for the businessman and woman, but mobile phones and motor cars are a potentially lethal mix. **Damien Hansen** reports on a study to be carried out on the impact of the mobile phone on driving performance.

# Call to ban car phones

**M**OBILE phones are essential business tools for millions of people around the world, but for many motorists the phones do nothing but drive them 'round the bend.

Now, researchers at Griffith University on the Gold Coast are suggesting mobile phones do much more than that. In a lot of cases, they drive motorists off the road entirely.

Dr Paul Treffner and his team from the School of Physiotherapy and Exercise Science's biomechanics-dynamics department are the driving force behind a unique study into the impact of mobile-phone conversations on the performance of motorists.

At the launch of the study at the Holden Performance Driving Centre yesterday, Dr Treffner and co-investigator Rob Barrett stressed the importance of the ground-breaking research.

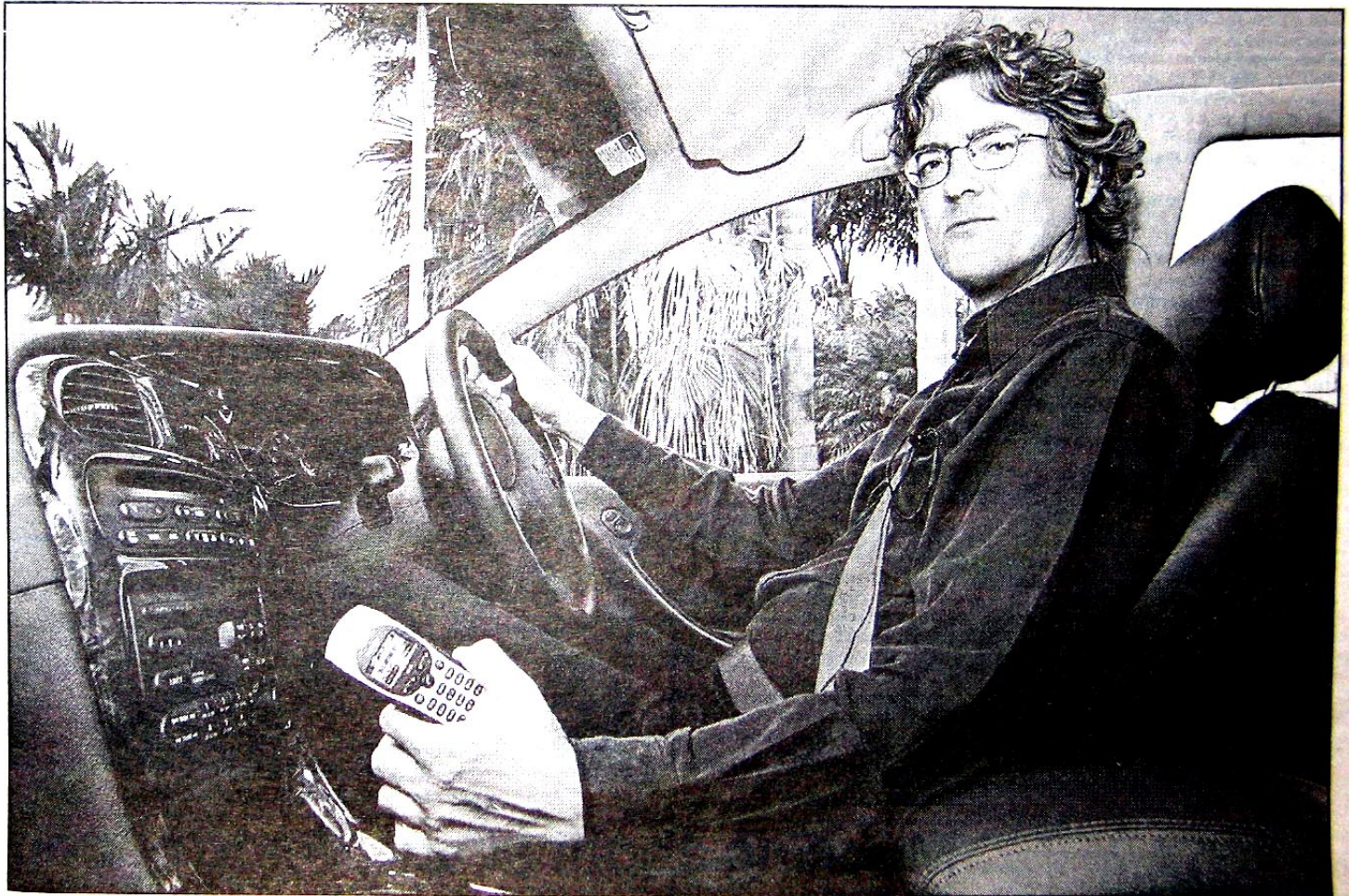
"There are studies that look at the effects of phone use using driving simulators, but that's not real driving," said Dr Treffner.

"We will be the first to look at the biomechanical variables and at how a driver's attention is compromised."

The study, made possible by a \$65,000 grant from the Australian Research Council, will take place on the Gold Coast and will examine the effect of driver behaviour, specifically in relation to the use of mobile phone hands-free kits.

"A previous study showed that there was no difference between talking handheld or hands-free when driving," said Dr Treffner.

As the current legislation stands, it is legal to drive while using a hands-free kit, but Dr Treffner's research is set to prove that it is no safer to drive while talking with a hands-free kit.



Hands off that phone! Dr Paul Treffner of Griffith University is to study the potentially fatal mix of phones and cars

As the current legislation stands, it is legal to drive while using a hands-free kit, but Dr Treffner's research is set to prove that it is no safer to drive while talking with both hands on the wheel.

"Even though driving drunk is illegal, people still do it.

"If driving with a hands-free kit was illegal, people would still probably do it. It's a Catch 22 situation," he said.

"With the concept of the mobile office coming to the fore, I think there are huge challenges for modern society, and for Australian society in particular, because we enjoy our technology and exploit it," he said.

"I wouldn't be surprised if legislation is eventually promulgated to ban all phone usage while driving. That would be a benefit to safety on the road."

A Canadian study published in 1997 showed that drivers who hold conversations using a hands-free phone increase their chances of having an accident four-fold, as if they were legally drunk.

"The study has found there is a difference between talking to a passenger and talking on a mobile phone," he said.

Australia boasts one of the highest rates of mobile-phone use per capita in the world and it is hoped the study will have far-reaching ramifications.

Dr Treffner said that the investigation will also look far beyond the effect of distractions within a car and focus on

## Hands off that phone! Dr Paul Treffner of Griffith University is to study the potentially fatal mix of phones and cars

the implications for manufacturers as well as lawmakers.

In Queensland, inattention ranks ahead of speeding as a cause of fatal crashes. According to police, a driver who was using a mobile phone died in a crash near Mackay earlier this month.

In the US, a recent insurance firm survey showed that 69 per cent of drivers had at times eaten while driving, 44 per cent admitted using a phone while driving, 12 per cent had applied make-up or shaved and 7 per cent had read either a book or newspaper.

It would appear that drivers in Queensland do not watch the road well enough. Police list inattention as a factor in almost one third of all crashes.

Queensland Transport reports that disobeying traffic rules was the sole more common factor in crashes during 1999, the most recent year for which figures are available.

However, when fatal crashes were analysed by police, inattention dropped to fourth place (17 per cent), behind disobeying traffic rules, alcohol/drugs and inexperience.

Dr Treffner admits discipline plays a big part when it comes to driver concentration, but says that the choice is not

always ours when it comes to talking on the phone.

"Earlier studies have shown that we are distracted for up to five minutes after we have finished talking on the phone while in the car," he said.

In Queensland, driving while using a mobile phone which is not hands-free carries a \$75 fine, while the maximum penalty for driving without due care and attention is six months' jail and a \$3000 fine.

A Queensland police spokesman's warning was simple:

"Driving without due care covers situations like people who drop something in their lap, are distracted by a phone or by adjusting the dials on a radio. It comes to our notice most when we're investigating the cause of an accident."

To minimise distractions, car manufacturers are now mounting radio control buttons on a vehicle's steering wheel and making other knobs and switches larger.

The Griffith University group's research on braking has already produced some interesting results. The team looked at how drivers use vision to guide braking before stopping.

They tested untrained and expert

drivers talking on mobile phones while travelling at a variety of speeds, and found all of them initiated braking only five seconds before the anticipated time of contact with the target.

David Lee, a researcher studying the relationship between vision and driving, had forecast the five second margin as early as 1976, but the Griffith University research is the first to confirm it with real driving data.

Dr Treffner says that, during the mobile-phone study, participants will deal with different levels of conversation, covering various subjects, while driving.

"We'll have maybe four or five different levels of conversation, and that is important because the world is full of different conversations of varying complexity," he said.

"Some participants will be asked to count backwards from 100, while others might be asked very basic questions."

Dr Treffner said that recent research has found that the most common accident to occur while people are talking on the phone is the rear end collision — because people are no longer sensitive to basic driving situations.

The results of the study are expected to be available next year.

If driving with a hands-free kit was illegal, people would still probably do it. It's a Catch 22 situation