

Phones may not hurt you, but shopping might

Gordon Woolf finds good news for those in hospitals but danger lurking in shops

You won't be allowed to take or make a cell phone call while in an operating theatre, but many hospitals worldwide may relax their rules on mobile phones and wireless devices such as Blackberry-coupled laptops and handhelds following the latest research published in the Mayo Clinic Proceedings "Use of Cellular Telephones in the Hospital Environment"*

The tests, conducted in Rochester, Minnesota, USA, from February to June last year showed no cases of phones in normal usage, including Blackberry devices, interfering with medical equipment. Other studies have shown interference could occur if you place your phone within two inches of the data port on a ventilator, or have the phone within two inches of the machine when it rings.

Cell phones alter their power output based on the incoming signal. Where the incoming signal is weak, the phones transmit at a higher power, so the tests measured reception levels to take this into account.

The tests did not cover areas where patients would not be likely to take calls, such as operating suites, but I heard recently of a job seeker answering a cellular call while expecting those interviewing him to wait, so anything is possible. The urge to answer that ring is so strong that it might create an automatic response even in a coma, but that's my comment, not the clinic's.

The myth that cell phones cause explosions at service stations was debunked long ago, and my guess would be that the ban might be justified by not wanting someone occupying space by a petrol pump while they are neither filling the tank nor paying for the fuel. That interviewing panel mentioned above would be sympathetic.

Not a myth is the tale that heart pacemakers can be upset by those tag-checking security devices standing in the entrances of many stores. A case much reported in the USA was of an elderly woman who had been seated against the back of the electronic article surveillance (EAS) device. She passed out and needed to be revived several times before a staff member decided to move her away; she then recovered quickly.

cellphone.txt

EAS dangers are covered in a report, again from the Mayo Clinic**, which states that while there is general advice on the lines of "don't linger, don't lean", EAS systems may still be positioned near checkout counters and/or near items for sale so people are tempted to do just that.

Times of events recorded in a pacemaker-type device, an inserted defibrillator, of a 71-year-old man coincided exactly with when he was at a checkout counter. The man had felt the effect and staggered, but fortunately staggered just far enough to take him out of range.

The report, by Drs Gimbel and Cox, states: "Architects and designers of retail space might avoid placing the checkout area (spaces where lingering is likely to occur) close to where EAS systems will be positioned..." and added that "items of interest should not be positioned in such a way as to encourage prolonged proximal exposure to an EAS system."

They were concerned that EAS systems may be "camouflaged" by advertising, rendering them invisible to the customer or, worse, drawing the customer with an implantable device toward them.

There seems to be no danger in just walking past such devices.

QUOTE:

Mobile phones are the only subject on which men boast about who's got the smallest.
-- Neil Kinnock

The Americans have need of the telephone, but we do not. We have plenty of messenger boys. -- Sir William Preece, chief engineer of the British Post Office, 1876

* available at

<http://www.mayoclinicproceedings.com/pdf%2F8203%2F8203a1%2Epdf>

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