

Health care professionals assert common sense with technology

By Elizabeth Lowe

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Dr. Marc I. Leavey recently walked into an exam room at his Lutherville office to meet with a patient and found the man feverously typing on his laptop, unable to divert his attention.

“This was for real, and I think it is a growing problem,” said Leavey, an internist at Lutherville Personal Physicians, an affiliate of Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore. “There’s a whole social phenomenon, the need to always be doing something. Technology is great when it’s used as a tool as intended.”

Teenagers and adults alike are preoccupied with technological gadgets and many are constantly plugged into email, on social networking sites and surfing the web.

Leavey suggests people “schedule time, make it priority” to unplug from their gadgets and engage with one another, face-to-face.

Addiction to technology and the lack of focused attention given to the task at hand endangers pedestrians, joggers, cyclists and motorists – many of whom text and talk on their cell phones and wear headphones to listen to music while engaged in their respective activities.

“We’re down to common sense here,” Leavey said. “You wouldn’t walk on a busy street blindfolded. We rely on our senses for our safety.”

In Maryland and a handful of other states across the country, it is illegal to talk or text on a hand-held cell phone while driving.

In May, a Prince George’s County teenager was killed by a freight train as she

walked on train tracks, according to news reports. The 17-year-old was reportedly wearing headphones as she walked on the tracks and didn't hear the oncoming train.

Ocean City officials are seeing an uptick in the number of pedestrians being hit by cars this summer, according to news reports. Many pedestrians are reportedly jaywalking.

In a July 10 interview with NBC, Francesco Schettino, captain of the cruise ship Costa Concordia, said he was distracted by a phone call when the ship capsized off the coast of Italy in January, killing 32 people, including two Americans.

Dr. David Scharff, an internist whose practice is in Brewers Hill and who has admitting privileges at Mercy Medical Center, is an avid cyclist who has biked to-and-from his Federal Hill home and work for the past 10 years.

"I ride super aware of everything that's around me," Scharff said. "You listen for car motors, you listen for the sound of car doors opening and closing, you look for signs of brake lights. There's this hyper awareness of everything going on around you."

"Because a bike doesn't make any noise," Scharff said, "I've had pedestrians step right off the curb in front of me because they're intently text messaging on their cell phones."

Drivers who are texting or talking on their cell phones while driving stick out, Scharff said, because they're typically driving under the speed limit and not using their turn signal.

"I definitely see everybody doing it," Scharff said. "I don't think it's a specific generation. I think that the emphasis needs to be put on safety."

Hedy Tanenholtz, a clinical specialist at St. Agnes Hospital who also runs the Catonsville institution's driver rehabilitation program, said teenagers and adults alike think they can multitask, but in reality cannot successfully do so.

"There is this focused attention or controlled attention where you can really only do one thing well at a time," Tanenholtz said. "(When driving), turn off the radio, limit your conversation in the car and just generally unplug."

