

SPECIAL REPORT

The cordless phone: fad and hazard

By JES ODAM

Cordless telephones.

They're becoming the new communications fad, particularly as prices come tumbling down and spring beckons British Columbians into their back yards.

In the words of one salesman, people believe they are "a great little gizmo."

But in the words of medical experts, they can be hazardous to your hearing.

They also mean your every word can be listened into by somebody else, and that your phone can be used for another's long distance call.

With an estimated 600 to 700 of the phones being sold in the Lower Mainland every month (a lot more were sold at Christmas), all these problems have already surfaced.

A Vancouver ear specialist said he has had three patients who have suffered permanent hearing damage through their use of cordless phones.

B.C. Tel has investigated complaints of wrongly billed long distance calls and found they involved homes with cordless phones.

Conversations have been overheard, not only on other nearby cordless phones working on the same channel — there are only five available at the moment — but on domestic and port-

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The cordless telephone: fad with some problems

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able radios tuned to entirely different frequencies.

One jogger who stopped to "twiddle the dial" of his small set heard two men talking in detail about their sexual exploits, with one boasting of what he planned to do with a woman that night.

A suburban resident, who asked not to be identified, said he was retuning his home radio when he heard a call referring to a cocaine buy.

Both calls were overheard on the AM band, although the cordless phones work on the FM band.

Bruce Drake, deputy regional director in Vancouver for the federal department of communications, said there are two ways that cordless telephone conversations can be picked up by ordinary radios — through "swamping" a nearby set with their signal, or because they also send out a signal on multiples of their own frequency. These signals are known as harmonics.

"The third or fifth harmonic will be on an ordinary broadcast band and be picked up by a radio close by," Drake said.

He said this applies particularly to the cheaper cordless phones.

The hearing damage, which has been reported in the U.S. as well as the Lower Mainland, can come when users of cordless phones fail to switch the handset to "talk" before putting it to their ear.

Unlike a conventional telephone, the cordless model will continue to ring, loudly.

The ear specialist, who asked not to be named, said if the hand-

set is pressed tightly to the ear, the sound cannot leak out and it all goes into the ear, permanently damaging sensitive cells in the inner ear.

Most cordless telephones have the "ringing" mechanism in the handset, which also serves as the earpiece. Manufacturers and many retailers warn buyers to turn the ringer off, by use of the "talk" switch, before putting the handset to their ear.

Don Fraser of Mona Electronics, a Vancouver company that distributes one brand of combined cordless telephones and clock radios, said: "There is only a certain amount you can do to protect people against stupidity."

He said his company's phones have had the volume of the ringing measured and even at the highest level — 128 decibels — the sound would have to be in somebody's ear for 10 seconds to do damage.

"If somebody did have it at their ear when it rang, we would expect them to yank it off as fast as possible, in less than a second," he added.

Dr. Jerome Goldstein, deputy executive vice-president of a U.S. medical academy, whose members include specialists in ear damage, said the problem is that when any telephone rings, "people habitually put it to their ear."

He said "several dozen cases" of deafness from cordless phones have now been reported to the Washington, D.C.-based American Academy of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery.

The academy has published a bulletin to its members, warning

that some phones have been found to produce 141 decibels when ringing and that there have been documented cases of permanent hearing loss from them.

Goldstein said the cases have been reported by the academy to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, a federal agency. In turn, the commission has met with manufacturers on the problem.

He said the amount of damage varies according to how loud the ringing is and how close the handset was to the ear at the time.

"In some cases the loss of hearing has been considerable. In others, people complain of a ringing in their ear but there is no objective evidence of damage," he added.

A spokesman in the Vancouver office of the product safety division of the federal department of consumer affairs said he has passed on to Ottawa the local cases referred to by the ear specialist.

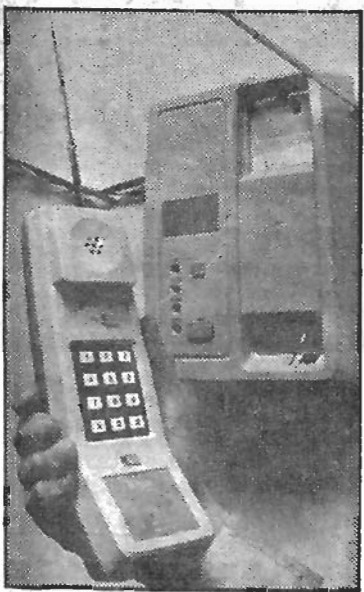
"We are now looking into the problem," he said.

Wally Warren, B.C. Tel's product manager for cordless phones, said the units are popular sale items, "almost as if they are an emotional thing because of the flexibility of not being tied to a cord in the house."

He said B.C. Tel is selling 100 to 150 a month and there are a number of other retailers selling them, including department stores and drugstores.

"People are charging out buying them thinking they are such a great little gizmo," he added.

B.C. Tel, he said, explains potential problems to customers



CORDLESS PHONE

... it could harm your hearing

and tells how to avoid them — but has not heard of the deafness complaints.

A spokesman for The Other Phone Store on Main, selling three or four cordless phones a day, said one of the major concerns is that there are a lot of units designed to sell for \$79 to \$89, "and they are just inferior."

While not having had any complaints of deafness or wrong billing, he said noise caused by interference is a problem, with some areas — such as downtown Vancouver and the West End — being totally unsuitable because of the number of radio transmissions, electrical substations and hydro lines.

Distributor Fraser, who has heard of one complaint of deafness — from an alleged shoplifter holding the unit to his ear as he walked out of a store — said real bargains are coming up as manufacturers bring out new lines that incorporate user-set security codes to stop somebody else putting calls through their base stations.