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Research takes aim at those driving drunk

By: Ben Fornell - The Daily Iowan

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One day, people might get busted by their cars.

Researchers at the UI's National Advanced Driving Simulator received a \$2.5 million National Highway Traffic Safety Administration grant on Wednesday to study the use of sensors onboard vehicles that would detect driver impairment due to alcohol.

John Lee, a UI professor of industrial and mechanical engineering and the primary investigator for the project, said the research is focused on how to detect drivers who may be dangerous.

"New technology is being developed that really gives us a good window into the driver's state," he said, and one day, the research could be used to detect those who are impaired because of drugs or fatigue.

Lee said that his team will use steering maneuvers, eye movements, brake and accelerator control, among other things, to measure impairment. He is also experimenting with a device that would sample air inside the car and measure it for concentrations of alcohol.

"The last thing we want to do is say people are impaired when they're not," Lee said, noting that impairment would be determined collectively by the sensors.

What would happen if drivers were deemed to be drunk? The application of his research is a matter for the government, Lee said.

"It doesn't take much imagination to see where this technology could be abused," said Ben Stone, the executive director the American Civil Liberties Union of Iowa.

The kind of research the grant funds could one day limit a person's freedom to enjoy a drink or two responsibly, he said.

"The debate really is, or will be, to what extent do free citizens have the right to make that decision for themselves," Stone said.

Technology already exists to prevent those who have been convicted of drunken driving from starting a car if they've had anything to drink, he noted. Known as ignition interlock systems, the devices consist of an alcohol sensor into which drivers must blow to start their cars. If the sensor registers any alcohol, the system goes off like a car alarm, and police are notified. The devices are court-mandated for drunken drivers in Illinois, New Mexico, Arizona, and Louisiana.

Stephen Carr, the executive director of the Illinois division of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, said that similar systems, without the alert features, will be standard equipment in all vehicles within 20 years. The devices would only be used to enforce the legal blood-alcohol limit, he said, but their expense would be passed along to consumers like the cost of airbags and seat belts.

"We're never trying to say, 'Don't drink. Don't have a good time,' " Carr said. "We're just saying that, in 65 years, more than 1.2 million people have been killed in drunk-driving accidents. We're looking for a solution, because people don't make the right choices."

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