

# Hear Me Now?

The list of places where cell phones are banned—such as hospitals and on planes—is getting shorter

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It is getting harder these days to find a quiet place free of the chatter from someone talking on a mobile phone.

On trains or buses, even standing in line for a sandwich, conversations abound. But in places like hospitals and airplanes, where the fear that critical high-tech gear would be compromised by a wireless signal, silence ruled. Not for much longer.

At Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago, cell phone use is allowed everywhere except intensive-care units. There's even an in-building antenna system to improve reception.

And late last year, the Federal Communications Commission launched a policy review that may put an end to the agency's ban on use of cell phones in aircraft. Currently, federal aviation authorities prohibit in-flight cell phone use out of concern for potential disruption of cockpit navigation or communication systems.

That argument over interference was similar in hospitals.

But as doctors have increasingly started to use wireless technology to communicate with patients, and as there has been a realization that digital phones aren't a major interference threat to critical equipment, many hospitals now embrace cell phones.

And besides, many patients and their visitors simply ignored the rules against using them.

"It's a trend where wireless is changing from being seen as a negative to becoming a positive," said Andrew Cole, a vice president for consultant A.T. Kearney. "Hospital administrators see the threat of equipment interference from phones was overhyped. The same realization is under way in the airline industry."

## Cracking down

Yet there are places—even countries—where cell phone bans have gotten stricter. At schools and even some offices, there's a fear that cell phones—particularly ones with cam-

eras—can be used to cheat on tests or steal company secrets.

Camera phones have been banned in Saudi Arabia and North Korea to protect against the theft of state secrets. And in South Korea, cell phone manufacturers are required to make camera phones emit an audible noise or flash when taking pictures to make it more difficult to take photos without someone's permission.

Even the U.S. government has taken action.

The Air Force, for instance, has declared camera phones "an unacceptable risk to homeland security" and has banned them from all areas that deal with classified information. Federal charges could be filed against anyone who runs afoul of the ban, the Air Force says.

Meanwhile, workplace policies are being altered because of cell phone abuse.

At General Motors, visitors must surrender cell phones in high-security research areas while employees are asked not to bring them to work. Signs are posted at GM facilities to reinforce the policy.

And at Texas Instruments, which makes chips used in camera phones, employees can keep their camera phones at work as long as they do not take pictures. "We do have information to protect," a spokeswoman said. "We follow the saying, 'New tools but old rules.'"

## Hospital policies change

Although it is unclear how many hospitals have altered their policy toward cell phones, most experts say the trend is to rescind cell phone bans or to informally drop enforcement.

At Children's Memorial, embracing cell phones came as an afterthought to an upgrade in patient care.

The hospital's new system to assure that patients get the proper medications in the correct dosage requires bar codes to identify the patient and the medication to be administered.

"We do that at the bedside, and we don't have the money or the space to put a PC by every bed," said William Brook, the hospital's information technology director.

Instead, a bar-code scanner attached to a portable computer sends wireless signals to a

central computer to confirm medications are given as prescribed. InnerWireless, a Texas-based firm, installed an in-building antenna system to carry the wireless signals.

As a bonus, the antennas were wired so they could deliver signals to pagers worn by physicians.

The antennas also deliver wireless calls inside the hospital.

"It makes for a better customer relationship," Brook said. "If I'm in my daughter's room and can get five bars of reception on my phone, I'm happier."

## Improving reception

At Rockford Memorial Hospital, U.S. Cellular Corp. installed an in-building antenna to bring its signal to parts of the building that formerly were dead spots.

"Many hospitals banned cell phones because of interference concerns," said Dennis L'Heureux, the hospital's chief information officer. "But digital phones emit small amounts of power. We tested them and found no risk to our equipment."

The real potential for cell phones in hospitals is to provide wireless messaging, said Jay Ellison, U.S. Cellular's executive vice president for operations.

"Most hospitals are now rethinking their original attitudes and looking at wireless as a tool for the medical industry," he said.

At Swedish American Hospital in Rockford, administrators are not banning cell phones but instead enforcing proper etiquette, said Dr. Kathleen Kelly, chief medical officer.

"Within the past six months we changed our ban," she said. "We want to be careful not to invade anyone's privacy—those you are speaking to or about."

"We don't want phones used in hallways and public places. But we have rooms and offices set aside where conversations can be private. The bottom line is the days of sitting by your desk waiting for a call are disappearing."