UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Guidance Note 11: Mobile phones and other personal electronic equipment – their use in laboratories and workshop areas

Introduction and scope

This guidance applies to mobile phones and other portable electronic devices such as personal mp3 and mp4 players and iPods.

The increase in ownership and all-pervasive use of mobile phones and other portable electronic devices means they are now being taken into laboratory areas, where this may present a hazard, not only for the owner of the device, but for others in the work area. The following issues should be considered during the preparation of a risk assessment, and these guidelines observed.

Laptops and tablets will also be subject to sections of this guidance if they are taken into laboratory areas.

Areas where such devices are prohibited or restricted

CL3 labs, Chemistry labs and "Hot" Labs

Mobile phones and other personal electronic devices must **not** be taken into Containment Level 3 labs or "hot labs" (where radioactive isotopes are used). This is because of the possibility of contamination, the risk associated with that contamination and the need to avoid distraction while undertaking experimental procedures.

Mobile devices may be prohibited or restricted in labs handling chemicals (which is likely to be all laboratories), and this should be assessed on a case by case basis.

It should be noted that local decisions may be taken on whether to prohibit or restrict devices in any facility, in addition to those stated above.

Issues to consider in other areas

Contamination

CL2/CL1 Labs and other labs

In other laboratory areas the risk of contamination must be carefully considered. Phones may be taken into the lab area on one's person, but **must not** be handled with gloved hands, potentially contaminated hands or placed on bench surfaces. If a phone should ring while an individual is in the lab, or if an individual needs to make a call, that person must de-glove before answering the phone, or else remove their protective clothing and step outside deal with a call.

On no account must phones or devices be handled if there is any possibility of contamination. It is often impossible to tell whether gloves are contaminated, and hence this should always be assumed.

Phones are held near the mouth and eyes, which are more susceptible to infection or damage following contamination with biological or chemical agents.

Having to take gloves off repeatedly to use mobile devices potentially increases the likelihood of having a lapse in concentration that would allow skin to come in contact with contaminants on the gloves. Therefore serious consideration must be given to leaving devices outside the lab or switching the device off during periods in the lab.

Lone working

There may be situations where individuals may be working alone, out of hours, in a laboratory. In these cases access to a mobile phone may be considered a control measure as it allows the individual to summon help if needed. If this is the case the individual should keep the phone on their person, under their lab coat, and only make calls in an emergency or accept calls at pre-arranged intervals.

This arrangement does not remove the need for a full assessment of the risks associated with lone working. The individual may become incapacitated and be unable to use the mobile device. Consideration should therefore be given to more robust monitoring systems, involving regular checks by Security or the use of "man-down" alarms.

Distraction

Mobile phones can be a severe distraction, which is why it is illegal to use a handheld mobile when driving. They may also distract workers at the bench or in the workshop, which may result in an accident during a safety critical process. Phones should be left outside the lab/workshop if this is perceived to be a risk, or else switched off/turned to silent if kept on one's person. This should be considered in the risk assessment for all the work in the area. In particular mobile phones should be left outside the lab/workshop if the work undertaken will involve the use of heavy equipment, high-intensity lasers or other potentially hazardous pieces of equipment.

Radios may also be a source of annoyance and distraction if played loudly throughout the lab. There should be consideration for other occupants who may not share your taste in music.

Listening to music through earbuds/headphones

Individuals working in laboratories or workshops must be able to participate in normal communication and be able to hear what is happening in their working area, including fire alarms. Portable music devices should only be worn in low risk areas, where there is no risk from contamination or distraction. Individuals must only wear one earbud, and must not remove or adjust earbuds with contaminated hands or gloves.

Earbuds should **not** be worn if machinery with moving parts is being operated, e.g., centrifuges, lathes, drills, etc., to ensure the risk of entanglement is not increased.

Earbuds must never be worn where reduced situational awareness could result in an accident or incident. Headphones must not be worn in laboratories as they will completely cover the ears and cannot easily be adjusted to allow one ear to be uncovered.

Ignition risk

It is possible that a mobile phone may ignite flammable vapours under certain conditions. Therefore great care must be taken in the laboratory and, where there is a risk of ignition, phones and other devices must be left outside the lab. This should be considered in the risk assessment for the work.

Interference with equipment

It is believed that mobile phones and other portable electronic devices may interfere with sensitive equipment. If the risk assessment identifies this as an issue phones/devices should be left outside the laboratory.