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EDITORIAL

The Great Overcoat Scare

Science. Dr. Noitall, you are the world authority on low-risk, high-publicity hazards; the man who generated the Salem witch trials; the man who got Alar on prime-time television; the man who plunged the stock market on cellular phones.

Noitall. A vast understatement of my true worth.

Science. Have you discovered any new hazards that may be big news in the future?

Noitall. Overcoats are a major cause of traffic accidents.

Science. How can that be?

Noitall. The average person walks across a street at 6.7076 kilometers per hour. When weighed down with a 2-kilogram overcoat, a man of 75 kilograms walks at 6.5201 kilometers per hour and a woman of 50 kilograms walks 6.426 kilometers per hour. The added exposure to murderous vehicles can be easily calculated to result in thousands of deaths per year.

Science. How could such a small increase in time result in so many added deaths?

Noitall. Easy. The added risk per person is minor, but there are 4 billion people on the globe exposed to gas-guzzling automobiles, big-wheeled ox carts, wildly careening rickshaws, and out-of-control tricycles. The valley of death is what modern streets have become.

Science. How is the calculation made?

Noitall. We assume that the inverse relationship between weight and walking rate is linear and that pedestrians are spherical. The rest of the calculation is simple.

Science. And who are these scientists?

Noitall. The very best that money can buy. They are part of the Basic Research Institute of the Trial Lawyers Charitable Foundation. They have excellent incentives for superior work because they are offered a percentage of the punitive damage awards.

Science. What punitive damages? Who is at fault in this disaster?

Noitall. The overcoat manufacturers, of course. Their willingness to sell heavy overcoats with no notice to customers of the high-traffic risk is evidence of malice of major proportions, which requires punitive damages and massive law suits.

Science. But aren't there some redeeming values to overcoats, such as less pneumonia?

Noitall. One great principle of our court system is that we do not allow testimony in regard to the benefits of a product. If there is any risk whatsoever, even an unproven or imaginary risk, culpability is assumed. Otherwise unscrupulous overcoat manufacturers could get sympathy from gullible juries who would think they were not deliberately trying to create automobile accidents.

Science. But can you be sure your calculated walking rate is 6.5201 and not 6.5202?

Noitall. That is one of the great secrets in the propagation of scares. Once a scientist says, "There might be a problem," some ambitious reporter will say scientists are seriously considering the problem. While scientists are struggling to nail down the fourth decimal place of a nondetectable risk, the regulatory agencies say, "Scientists say there isn't a risk, but the data are still not certain, so we should be conservative and ban the product pending a final study that determines its exact risk."

Science. But isn't it desirable to get the right data?

Noitall. Few governments like to spend billions to prove that a highly dubious risk is not worth worrying about. So the uncertainty fuels the scare and helps the lawsuits.

Science. But if they do a study and show the risk is negligible, you look silly. Don't you care?

Noitall. I never look silly. If they solve the problem to four decimals, I just ask for five. If they say that's trivial, I say I'm worried about lives, whereas my opponents care more about money than lives.

Science. Is there a societal solution to the overcoat problem?

Noitall. There is always "a societal solution," and it is always very expensive. Already, high voltage lines, a nonproven risk, are being put underground or detoured miles around cities at great expense to the consumer to avoid bad publicity or lawsuits. Consumers, of course, never realize this because the expense is buried in the overall bill.

Science. In the case of overcoats, what would you suggest?

Noitall. Society should provide every person with an "overcoat caddie," whose function is to carry the overcoat across the street for the pedestrian. It will be expensive but less than the lawsuits and regulatory provisions.

Daniel E. Koshland, Jr.

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