The Weathervane  Russell T. Stodd MD

The Hardest Thing To Cope With Is Sheer Stupidity.
In 1999, 519 eye injuries resulted from paintball, with bleeding and retinal detachment among the most common consequences. Sadly, many of these episodes caused lasting visual impairment. Paintball is a battle game in which players shoot at each other with guns powered by compressed gas. Marble size projectiles are filled with paint and burst when they hit players causing a splatter. According to data collected by U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, 2,780 paintball injuries were reported in 2000, about 1/3 in children under age 15. It ought to be obvious that playing paintball requires eye protection, but some players fail to wear face masks or goggles. This is probably the same gene pool that eschews a helmet while biking, and hates to fasten a seat belt.

Two Wrongs Don't Make A Right, But They May Make A Good Excuse.
Nice folks, those creative people at Abbott Labs, or are they? Abbott’s drug Norvir has been used in combination for years to treat patients with AIDS, and has been a lucrative seller, priced at $54 for a month’s use. But now Abbott has a newer AIDS medication, Kalestra, somewhat pricier, but it cannot hold market share compared to the less expensive cocktail therapy which includes Norvir. What to do? No problem for Abbott. Just raise the price of Norvir by 400% ($265/month), and push the combination program out of range. Abbott’s explanation is that the new price better reflects the drug’s value in treating AIDS, and the cost of “improving formulation.” Without doubt, people managing the pharmaceutical industry want profits, and have no interest in or compassion for the consumer.

If God Lived On Earth, People Would Break His Windows.
It might be laughable, if it were not so hazardous, but the day after Thanksgiving can be a dangerous event at Wal-Mart or K-Mart. Shoppers will line up at four AM in order to get a $99 flat screen television, or a bargain DVD-VCR. In Orange City, Florida, paramedics were called at six AM when a shopper was found unconscious on the floor at a Wal-Mart store. She had a DVD player resting under her left arm. Some injured shoppers claim that stores do not do enough to protect customers who are literally kicking and trampling others in order to get a Tickle Me Elmo, Furby doll, or a Power Ranger. Law suits have blossomed against retailers, despite efforts made to manage crowds and allow for orderly business. Thanksgiving plus one is really a good day to read a book and listen to Christmas music.

There Are Vultures, And There Are Vultures.
Not all people are happy about the evolution and success of anti-AIDS medication. For awhile there was a market for investors who bought life insurance policies from AIDS patients. They would pay out part of the policy, and then realize the full face value for themselves when the patient died. But now, drugs have greatly increased the life expectancy of AIDS patients, and investors have failed to realize their expectations. Patients are not dying as was anticipated. Some investors claim that unscrupulous brokers misrepresented a patient’s life projection, and law suits have been filed for fraud and breach of promise. Is this ugly or what?

RIGOR MORRIS - The Cat Is Dead.
Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) infected 8,098 people last year with a death rate of about 10%. The virus showed remarkable ability to spread through human contact, e.g. touch, droplet, fomite, etc. The precise origin of the virus is still a mystery, but it is known that civet cats, a popular dinner delicacy in China where the first SARS cases presented, carry a SARS-like virus. No one has proved that civets spread the disease to humans, but the Chinese government fears an outbreak since a new case turned up last month with virus fragments matching the civet virus. The patient denied having any contact with a civet cat, either at dinner or otherwise. Still, in the southern province of Guangdong, authorities set out to slaughter 10,000 civets by “electrocution, incineration, or drowning.” Bridget Bardot wrote an angry letter to the Chinese premier protesting the action. I wonder what she looks like these days when she takes her clothes off? No, better I should just remember.

Money: A Blessing Of No Advantage Except When We Part With It.
Still another long-time malpractice insurance underwriter is departing the medical liability scene. Farmers Insurance Group has stopped offering new malpractice coverage, and will not renew existing policies for this year. The trial lawyers claim that insurers are misleading the public, but the simple facts speak for themselves. Almost all the for-profit carriers have left or are leaving the medical liability arena. The primary remaining providers are doctor owned, not-for-profit mutuals, and they are forced to hike premiums to stay alive. Some doctors have stopped doing high risk procedures, others no longer provide emergency call and refuse to accept patients on referral from the ER. It should be obvious that patients are increasingly at risk when the medical care system fails. Tort reform can offer some relief, but it is not a solution, and moreover this problem is not limited to medical liability. Businesses both large and small, city, county and state governments, manufacturers, auto makers, air carriers, service industries – all are held hostage to a broken liability process.

In The Air - It’s A Bird - It’s A Plane - It’s Super Nonsense.
CMS (Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services) has a budget of $30 million to educate Medicare recipients about benefits and federal healthcare resources available to the public. So, a mere $600,000 of this “budget dust” was spent by CMS (are you ready for this?) for a dirigible to float over college football games and major community events and senior activities. This super balloon is to act as a huge, mobile billboard with the toll free help line 1 800 MEDICARE printed on the side. It is scheduled to reach “different locations every day,” according to a CMS spokesperson. Will it be over Honolulu for the pro bowl? Too bad it isn’t inflated with hot air instead of helium. All that would be needed is a conduit out of Washington.

The Leash Of Her Worries.
Is it true that pets and their owners eventually come to look like each other? Nobody said Princess Anne of Great Britain was a great beauty, and apparently neither is her dog Florence, a bull terrier. All the animal did was attack a royal maid, and fatally assault one of Anne’s big mother’s (the Queen) corgis. Rex, Fido or Rover would immediately go to the bone yard, but Anne’s sweet puppy is going into therapy. Yes, doggie psychologist Roger Mugford, stated, “We are not talking about an aggressive dog. It is just a dog who is feeling a bit out of sorts about something.” Right! And invading Iraq had nothing to do with oil.

Be Careful Those Eclairs Can Attack When Threatened.
Armed with search warrants and packing firepower, the brave investigators from the Food and Drug Administration, descended upon the unsuspecting facility and seized 16.72 kilos of “hurtits, ciminamnon rolls and labels. The association for AIDS patients. They should pay part of their medical liability scene. Farmers Insurance Group has stopped offering new malpractice coverage, and will not renew existing policies for this year. The trial lawyers claim that insurers are misleading the public, but the simple facts speak for themselves. Almost all the for-profit carriers have left or are leaving, the medical liability arena. The primary remaining providers are doctor owned, not-for-profit mutuals, and they are forced to hike premiums to stay alive. Some doctors have stopped doing high risk procedures, others no longer provide emergency call and refuse to accept patients on referral from the ER. It should be obvious that patients are increasingly at risk when the medical care system fails. Tort reform can offer some relief, but it is not a solution, and moreover this problem is not limited to medical liability. Businesses both large and small, city, county and state governments, manufacturers, auto makers, air carriers, service industries – all are held hostage to a broken liability process.

If you have a comment on this column, please send it to me. I enjoy hearing from you.

ADDENDA
- So far, 45,000 people have resigned from the AARP in disapproval over leadership endorsement of the new Medicare law.
- Net worth - Queen Elizabeth $397 million; Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling - $444 million.
- In 2002, the California Highway Patrol issued 15,372 tickets for speeds greater than 100 mph.
- A soft drink company in Seattle created a soda flavored with turkey and gravy. It sold all 6,000 bottles in 2 hours.
- Outside of a dog, a book is man’s best friend. Inside a dog, it’s too dark to read.

Aloha and keep the faith — rts