The Weathervane  Russell T. Stodd MD

I Left My Glasses In The Bathroom And Now I'm Disabled.
The Supreme Court of the United States is having trouble with the Americans With Disability Act. How do you define "unmitigated?" The question of evaluating a disability in unmitigated state means an untreated medical condition, but does it refer to vision without glasses? Two sisters are suing United Airlines claiming to be disabled, because they failed to meet the standard of 20/100 visual acuity uncorrected. Of course, they both see 20/20 with glasses or contacts. Seven of the nine Justices wear glasses, and they seemed to have a magical revelation when Judge Scalia waved his glasses in the air and said that under these liberal interpretations of the ADA a "majority of Americans are disabled." A United Parcel Service driver with high blood pressure wants to qualify as disabled because if he stopped his drugs he would have serious problems — although he does take his medication. The ADA was supposed to increase the number of disabled in the workplace, but actually the number has dropped by 4% since the law was passed. And no one wants to talk about the JAMA December 1997 study that provided statistical support for the notion that workers with sensory impairments have more than their share of industrial accidents.

How To Make A Medical Meeting Into A Firestorm.
The Oregon Medical Association House of Delegates voted to continue to be the only state in the land where doctors can be reimbursed by the state Medicaid plan for providing assistance to suicidal patients. By a vote of 51 to 33 physicians decided to keep the state funding. Then the House voted to allow pharmacists to give "morning after" emergency contraception medications to women without a prescription. Doctors opposed to that measure were not happy with ceding the option to pharmacists, and others felt that the morning-after drugs actually are synonymous with abortion in some cases. Now, that is the kind of action that keeps delegates from dozing off at annual meetings.

A large majority of Americans (70%) want a strong patient protection act, but the Republican Senate leadership just doesn't get it. The Senate bill, a wimpy measure that could have been written by insurance lobbyists, was passed along party lines. Contrarily, the House seems ready to modify the legislation with what is necessary to curb some HMO abuses. The patient protection legislation currently being debated in the House of Representatives is really somewhat tardy, because the states are far ahead of Congress. Thirty states (including Hawaii) have already provided for the right of patients to appeal a negative insurance company decision for independent review, forty-seven states have banned gag clauses, thirty-five states have prudent layman standards for emergency room visits, twenty-eight states provide for health plan disclosure of pharmaceutical restrictions. Get with the program, Senator Lott.

One For The Road, Mat Be Two For The Cemetery.
According to federal highway-safety officials, U.S. drunken driving deaths fell by nearly 2% last year to an all time low in the seventeen years they have been keeping such data. Total DUI deaths were 15,935, still a huge number, making up 38% of the 41,471 total traffic fatalities in 1998. Hawaii's DUI statistics show a similar change through the 15 years the local Mothers Against Drunk Driving team has been monitoring the courts. The Hawaii Medical Association can take some credit, because it was through the HMA Auxiliary that the Hawaii MADD program was initiated.

If At First You Don't Succeed, Redefine Success.
Theo Seiler, M.D. is a professor of ophthalmology at the Free University in Berlin, Germany. He was the first to apply excimer photorefractive keratectomy in 1990. Now the professor has reported an overview on the complications of LASIK, notably intraocular keratectasia, the abnormal bulging of the cornea following laser surgery. The flap produced with LASIK is loose and has no mechanical tension for the cornea for at least the first year, and only the stromal bed bears the stress originating from the intraocular pressure. Dr. Seiler reported that in correcting myopia of more than 10 diopters, keratectasia may be as high as 3%. Considering changes with age, glaucoma potential and possibility of rubbing the eyes, what will be the frequency of keratectasia in 10 or 15 years?

To Err Is Human. To Forgive Is Against Company Policy.
The Supreme Court returned a degree of sanity to the judicial process when it ruled that expert witnesses will have to rely on truth. Judges will be able to block testimony from a witness whose theory hasn't been tested or subjected to peer review. After many years of corrupt medical testimony offered by sly lawyers with an agenda, expert witnesses opinions will have to be based on sound science. In the case of silicone breast implants, David Kessler, M.D. then head of the FDA, reacted to the publicity and banned their use. Now, many torts later, and following a score of peer-reviewed studies, including the Mayo Clinic, Johns Hopkins University, University of Michigan and others, no link was found between implants and various diseases. As spoken by Dr. Marcia Angell, executive editor of the New England Journal of Medicine and author of Science on Trial, "many women developed symptoms that any woman over 25 could develop" went looking for a culprit, and decided on implants. And along the way, billions of dollars have disappeared in the legal system and a major corporation was forced to declare bankruptcy. Late at night, introspective personal injury attorneys must sometimes question the social value of their endeavors.

Frankly, I'm Getting Tired Of Scientific Progress.
Technology at the end of the 20th century has struck once again. This time it is to answer the question on every canine breeder's mind, is Fifl pregnant? Yes, the dog's adopted parents will no longer have to chase the bitch around the back yard hoping to catch some urine, nor wait until she has a blossoming abdomen. Inpatient doggie parents can now take their girl to the local vet who can draw a blood sample, send it to a lab that specializes in dog testing, and in three days the answer will arrive. Of course, the question of fatherhood can still be a matter of surprise.

I Love Mankind. It's Just People That I Hate.
Frightening statistics in population reveal that the world's human population passed the one billion mark in 1804. By 1927, homo sapiens had doubled to 2 billion, and by 1960 we passed 3 billion, and by 1974 it was 4 billion, and 1987 the number came to 5 billion. 1999 will see 6 billion humans filling the office buildings, airports, suburbs, freeways, inner-cities, condos, K-Marts, elevators and bathrooms. Does anyone see a problem here?

If You Live Long Enough, You Find That Every Victory Turns Into Defeat.
It is getting tougher for HMOs to compete. Data collected by Weiss Ratings Inc. revealed that more than half of HMOs lost money in 1998. Touted by planners as the saving mechanism for escalating medical expenditures, 57% of HMOs collectively had $768 million in losses last year. Harris Methodist Health Plan in Arlington, Texas, lost $99 million to lead the red ink list. Many plans are skating on thin financial ice and are close to insolvency with lowering reserves. 100 HMOs fell below minimum risk-based capitol guidelines established by the National Assn. of Insurance Commissioners. These numbers show why so many HMOs no longer want to contract with Medicare. Could it be that the old standard indemnity plans and PPOs aren't really so wasteful after all?

ADDENDUM

- Cocaine users risk of heart attack is 24 times higher than normal in the first hour after taking the drug.
- Ancient Egyptians shaved off their eyebrows as a sign of mourning when their cats died.
- What happens if you are scared half to death twice?
- They call it PMS because mad cow disease was already taken.

Aloha and keep the faith — rm.