The Weathervane  Russell T. Stodd MD

**Age Doesn't Really Matter Unless You're Bourbon Or Cheese.**

Today there are 13 million drivers in the United States over the age of 70. By the year 2020, that number will be about 18 million, making this group the fastest growing segment of the driving population. The importance is that seniors have the highest rate of accidents per mile driven, and are found at fault in a high number of multiple-vehicle crashes. A recent conference on "The Eye and the Auto" included researchers, design engineers, ophthalmologists, and auto industry representatives met to gather ideas on improving driving performance of the elderly. Specifically, headlight glare and difficulty reading road signs were found as the main complaints. Polarized headlamps and windshields to reduce glare, more readable high-contrast blue and orange road signs, clearer basic dashboard displays, and more attention to the testing process, were some of the remedies offered.

**Some Open Minds Should Be Closed For Repairs.**

A $37 million lawsuit has been filed against Kaiser for the death of a Washington postal worker who died of anthrax poisoning. According to the complaint, the patient came to the Kaiser facility complaining of chest constriction, aching, and difficulty breathing. He explained that he thought he had been exposed to anthrax at work, because a woman at the facility came upon an envelope with "powder in it." Three days later he called a 911 operator (tape later released to the media) saying that he told the doctor of his symptoms and the envelope, but the doctor "thought that it was a virus or something." Several hours later, the man died. A Kaiser spokeswoman said they will vigorously defend the lawsuit. She stated that the doctor had consulted with the Maryland department of health, and was told there was "no known risk to mail handlers," and advised against use of antibiotics. So, the department of health is responsible? That would be a hard sell.

**Today's Scandals And Crimes Are Tomorrow's Good Old Days.**

Oregon's initial medical marijuana law left room for questionable medical practice. 78 year old osteopath Dr. Phillip Levence retired more than ten years ago, but he has been busy signing prescription marijuana cards. He has no office, keeps no records, and most patients never saw him. Now he is trying to catch up with the patients (or they are trying to catch up with him) because the Board of Medical Examiners sent letters to the patients whose applications he signed. They are asking for fuller documentation of their need for marijuana. Moreover, the Board also wants to see written evidence of a doctor-patient relationship. By signing 900 cards, the doctor has vouched for about 40% of the approved medical marijuana cards in Oregon. Under new rules, the authorizing doctor must review the patient’s record, examine the patient, and specify a plan for follow up or the card goes into default by January 15, 2002. The doctor must verify that the patient has a "debilitating medical condition," such as cancer, glaucoma, AIDS or severe pain.

**For Organ Donations, Gifts Aren't Making It.**

In the late 1980s 15,000 patients were awaiting organ donation. Today the number has escalated to 78,000, and is growing. The rate of recipients is growing four times faster than the rate of donors. In 1984 Congress banned financial incentives, and patients needing transplant have relied on a volunteer (altruistic) system that is clearly not meeting the needs. Last year about 3,000 patients in the United States died awaiting organ transplant, and many might have survived with donor tissue. The American Medical Association Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs wants to encourage study of the feasibility of allowing financial incentives to help provide donor tissue. Presently, it is estimated that 2/3 of people who die annually have organs suitable for donation that are either buried or cremated. Tax credits to the estate of an organ donor, or donations to a charitable organization selected by the donor have been suggested. Opponents say financial incentives are unethical, and could create a commercial market for organs that would exploit poor families. The statement was made that the human body is not property to be sold. Not true! Precedent already exists for the sale of blood and reproductive material.

**Skill Is Fine And Genius Is Splendid, But Make The Right Contacts.**

While anthrax captures the public attention, research on HIV has come up with a promising vaccine. Making antibodies to HIV has proven difficult because HIV is one of the most mutable viruses known. Typically, an infected individual harbors many different strains. A study reported in the scientific journal Nature Medicine found that engineered phosphates producing millions of random peptides reacted with HIV antibodies to act as a vaccine. Four out of five monkeys vaccinated failed to get sick when injected with a virulent AIDS virus while the seven control animals all died.

**There They Go. I Must Hasten To Follow For I Am Their Leader.**

The American Medical Association has a new Executive Vice President. Michael D. Maves, M.D., will take office January 15, 2002, and he already has a history of running a doctor organization. He was executive- president of the Academy of Otolaryngology and Head and Neck Surgery from 1994 to 1999. Dr. Maves has more recently been working on behalf of the drug industry and lobbies for over the counter medications in his role as President of the Consumer Health Products Assn. Let us hope the AMA Trustees have chosen wisely this time.

**Chicken Little Is Right!**

For the past 32 years, St. Paul Insurance Company has been the nation’s largest underwriter of medical malpractice insurance. Now, major losses have come about in medical liability to cause the management of St. Paul’s to reevaluate the direction of the company, and the outcome is that this strong company will no longer provide medical malpractice coverage for physicians. The significance of this move is that fewer choices are available to doctors in their search for cost effective liability coverage. In Hawaii we are fortunate to have Medical Insurance Exchange of California (MIEC), a physician-owned company, to provide protection at reasonable rates, but for many states the St. Paul decision comes as a major blow to physicians and hospitals.

**When In Danger, When In Doubt, Run In Circles — — — — —**

Our government wants to provide 250 million doses of anthrax/small pox vaccine at $2 each for mass immunization. Four companies are bidding for the contract to make the vaccine, but now are complaining that it will be impossible to prepare that many doses at the price of $500 million which the government plans to pay. One industry expert said it would cost closer to $1 billion. Sen. Arlen Specter (Rep. Pennsylvania - [don't you love him?]) criticized the CDC for not requesting more money. "This subcommittee is prepared to recommend, and I think the Congress would consent, funding whatever it takes," to get enough vaccine for the whole country. Does this really make sense? How about first immunizing those at risk? Moreover, it is likely that almost half the population is already immunized for small pox (us older guys), and there are drugs to treat anthrax. But, hey, it’s only tax money, so why not? (I shouldn’t even mention the 200 million doses of small pox vaccine that the World Health Organization incinerated in 1991 rather than spend $25,000 to store it.)

**Your Tax Dollars At Work.**

Recently declassified documents from the Science and Technology Directorate of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) revealed a five year project during the 1960s called "acoustic kitty." In an attempt to uncover the Kremlin’s deepest secrets, a cat was surgically altered to accommodate transmitting and control devices to allow it to eavesdrop from window sills, park benches and dustbins. (This is true!) When tested, the cat would walk off the job when he got hungry. "They took the animal to a park, let it out and it ran over by a taxi. There they were, sitting in the van with all those dials, and the cat was dead." The document is still partly censored, suggesting CIA embarrassment about revealing all the details (mating aberrations?).

**ADDENDA**

+ The average family will cough up more than $1,000 in credit card interest this year according to a credit card research group.
+ Your mouth produces a quart of saliva each day.
+ Clint Eastwood has two expressions: hat on and hat off.
+ San Francisco bumper sticker - "Keep your rosary off my ovaries." Aloha and keep the faith — — — — —

Contents of this column do not necessarily reflect the opinion or position of the Hawaii Ophthalmological Society and the Hawaii Medical Association. Editorial comment is strictly that of the writer.