A Good Scare Is Worth More To A Man Than Good Advice.
Everyone wants to relax and quiet worrying about severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), but that just isn’t possible. A recent major study in the New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) warned about the risk of commercial air travel. Previously, the World Health Organization defined a SARS contact as any coughing passenger within two rows, but the NEJM study suggests the contact area is wider than that. Analyzing one three hour flight where a 72-year-old man fatally ill with SARS, infected 22 others aboard a Boeing 737 (five of them died) it was found that the risk area is at least three rows. Coughing spreads the infectious droplets, at least an arm’s length, but researchers concluded that the “attack rate” of the virus is variable. The somewhat good news in the report is that the disease is spread only by travelers with outward symptoms, and the silent SARS carriers are not a risk to others.

The World Is Not Necessarily Just.
An unnamed individual violated Colorado and federal law by mailing a copy of a peer review report. The University of Colorado Hospital Authority asked for a restraining order to prevent publication of the mail received from an anonymous source, citing Colorado law and the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act provide for confidentiality. U.S. District Judge Walker Miller in Colorado trumped the Colorado peer review statute, and will allow the Rocky Mountain News to publish names and medical conditions discussed in the peer review report. Judge Miller allowed that the hospital arguments for patient privacy were legitimate, but that First Amendment case law is so strong it is overriding. The judge ruled that the public has a right to know about discipline in the medical profession, even if it does invade someone’s privacy. Anyone want to volunteer for the peer review committee?

If Medicare Says “You’ll Get Used To It.” You Won’t.
Medical Economics surveyed their readers about participation in Medicare; specifically, what would it take to drop out of the federal program. The survey makes no pretense about being a valid statistical sample, but probably is fairly representative. 13% of respondents have already opted out, and another 35% intend to drop out if fees are reduced again. 19% said Medicare is not so bad compared to their managed care contract (then why join that plan? Ed.), so Medicare would have to get much worse before dropping out. 33% are so dependent on Medicare patients, they could not consider dropping out. What most physicians do not know is that the current reimbursement fix is temporary, and the same gross domestic product (GDP) nonsense formula is still in the law, and will return to haunt doctors unless it is modified.

The University – A Modern School Where Football Is Taught.
If you anticipate that your child will attend a private college, you can buy into a prepaid tuition savings plan that will lock in the tuition cost at the present date, even if your offspring is in diapers. For example, if the tuition is currently $30,000, you can invest $15,000, and receive a certificate that will cover 1/2 of the college’s tuition for one year. Over 220 private colleges and universities, such as Princeton, Amherst and Univ. of Chicago, are in the “529 plan.” Meanwhile the school will have your money to play with prior to your seedling’s arrival, and suppose he/she proves to be academically too weak for acceptance? Still, considering the enormous increases in tuition in recent years, you might save a bundle.

Genius Is Childhood Recalled At Will.
A recent study published in Lancet wrestled with determining remedies for chronic low-back pain. 313 adults who complained of backache were randomly assigned mattresses of varying firmness. Using a scale of one to ten, with one being the softest and ten the firmest, patients reported their degrees of pain on waking and again 30 minutes later, as well as pain-related disability. They continued the study for 90 days. Historically, a firm mattress has been recommended, but overall, those given a medium mattress (rated 5.6) were twice as likely to report improvements while lying in bed, upon arising, and in back-pain related disability. So, it appears that all doctors need to do is to prescribe the Goldilocks program - not too soft, not too hard, but just right! No report as yet available on the porridge.

Every Decent Man Is Ashamed Of The Government He Works Under.
Congress tap dances around the issue of drug pricing, and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) continues to frighten people about buying cheap drugs from Canada, claiming they might be unsafe. It is certain that pharmaceutical people are applying heavy pressure to all government agencies, but patients are “voting with their feet.” Governors and mayors across the nation are ignoring the smokescreen and helping out on this very popular issue. New Hampshire has established a web site with direct links to Canadian pharmacies that allows residents to order drugs. Minnesota is also working on a web site, and has sent pharmacy inspectors to Canada, visiting several companies that said they want to participate. West Virginia is making plans to import Canadian drugs through local pharmacies rather than mail orders, and is not bothered to ask for federal approval. Vermont and Illinois are trying to get federal approval of similar programs. The FDA claims that city, county or state programs that import drugs violate federal law, and they could be liable. But as the saying goes, something done wrong often enough, becomes right.

The More Claret, The Less Clarity.
Despite the French penchant for red wine, a group studying breast cancer at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, has found that booze is not the answer. In interviews with 2000 women between the ages of 65 to 79, it was found that those postmenopausal women with a history of breast cancer, drinking two or more alcoholic drinks per day gave a 330% increased risk of lobular cancer and a 50% increased risk of ductal cancer, and a 40% increased risk of estrogen-receptor and progesterone-receptor positive breast cancer. Breast cancers which were hormonally insensitive, had no link to alcohol consumption.

Tell Me What You Eat, And I’ll Tell You What You Are.
With a semi disclaimer (“evidence suggests but does not prove”), the Food and Drug Administration is allowing claims that nuts may reduce the risk of heart disease. Much of the data are from large population studies asking people about eating habits, among other variables. Obviously, it cannot prove cause and effect, but studies have shown that nuts may help lower elevated serum cholesterol. Nuts are high in unsaturated (beneficial) fats. The FDA doesn’t allow health claims for certain nuts, including macadamias and cashews, because they contain higher levels of saturated fat, but the difference is very slight. Walnuts producers claim the highest levels of heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids, almonds have the highest levels of vitamin E and calcium, and peanuts contain resveratrol that may protect against heart disease.

The Best Thing That Can Be Said About Golf Is That It Isn’t Compulsory.
Attention golfers! The Mayo Clinic Sports Medicine Center is studying a phenomenon commonly called “the yips.” The condition is one in which the golfer suddenly twitches, jerks the hands, or flinches in situations of criticality. Sixteen low handicap golfers took part in a putting tournament, and whether beta blockers can help alleviate yips. A scenario was set up where the “critical situation” is lining up a 12 inch putt with $400 on the line, and cameras rolling to record the action. So far, Mayo researchers have been studying yips since 2000, with no defined conclusions.

ADDENDA
♦ On average in America, one person dies every thirty minutes as a result of drunken driving.
♦ At some point in their lives, 90% of women will be solely responsible for their finances.
♦ 56% of Americans sing Christmas carols to their pets.
♦ “Politics” is actually a combination of two latin roots: poli which means many, and tics which means blood suckers.
♦ When will everyone quit insisting that I have a nice day?

Aloha and keep the faith — rts

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.