



## Evil Can Never Be Eradicated, But It Is Necessary To Keep Struggling.

The July issue of Ophthalmology carried an interesting but painful summary of the ocular and nervous system injuries associated with shaken baby syndrome. Cases were evaluated for clinical findings, autopsy findings and outcome of survivors. A retrospective analysis of 123 child admissions over an eleven year period showed that visual response and pupillary reaction on initial examination showed a high correlation with survival. A good visual reaction was related to a promising neurologic outcome and good visual recovery. Devastating injuries can occur to vision, but the visual loss is most often the result of brain damage and not due to the presence of retinal bleeding. Retinal hemorrhages were noted in 83% of the patients, and 85% of those were bilateral. The finding of retinal hemorrhages is highly suggestive of abuse, but a limiting factor may be that in 30% of the patients, non-ophthalmologists failed to detect them.

## Just A Simple Little Problem Of Medical Research, Religion, Ethics, Disease, Law And Politics.

In Great Britain a government panel has recommended that restrictions on medical research using stem cells from cloned human embryos should be eased. Currently, the stem cells of greatest interest to researchers are obtained from aborted fetuses, or from human embryos created for in-vitro fertilization but donated to research by parents. The intent is to develop treatments for major diseases such as diabetes and Parkinson's disease. Some religious and other groups oppose using such tissue. The executive director of *Oregon Right to Life* said, "This is a tragedy for human kind, because we are now going to be doing harmful, destructive deadly experiments using human embryos." However, the director of *Progress Education Trust*, a London based medical charity stated, "The potential benefits to society are so huge that it would be unethical not to at least consider such research."

## Matter Can Neither Be Created Or Destroyed, However It Can Be Lost.

There aren't many corporate raiders in the health care industry, but raiders are ever on the alert for cash flow and Visx has that with about \$50 million of cash annually. Carl Icahn, a financier with a history of raiding airlines, has locked onto the laser eye surgery company. He disclosed his intent to buy more than \$15 million of Visx stock. In a defensive maneuver, the company's six member board unanimously adopted a poison-pill with a share-holder-rights plan. Visx stock traded as high as \$103 a share a year ago, but now hovers around \$22. The company has been battered by competition from Bausch & Lomb Inc., and Alcon Laboratories Inc. which bought Summit Technology, and Japanese owned Nidek. Meantime the promotional frenzy of ads and promises continues unabated.

## We're Making Progress. Things Are Getting Worse At A Slower Rate.

There is bad news and a little good news on the malpractice scene. The bad news is that the median award for malpractice soared in 1998, increasing from the previous year by 46% from \$515,738 to \$755,530. Also, the median cost of settlement jumped by 24% to \$497,412. The good news is that the overall number of favorable verdicts for plaintiffs decreased with surgical negligence dropping from 38 to 32%, but childbirth negligence increased from 35 to 46%. For the malpractice carriers there is a fate worse than death. The top five outcomes most likely to result in a plaintiff verdict in 1998 were brain injury (median cost \$4,089,914), paralysis (\$3,000,000), cancer (\$766,500), spinal nerve injury (\$700,000) and death (\$678,478).

## Men Are Not Arrested For Stealing, They Are Arrested For Being Caught.

The internet has many wondrous capabilities, but one of them is not information protection. Three years ago, an imaginative entrepreneur named Timothy Pickering set up a free website designed to reveal the mysteries of health-care costs. Want to know the doctors fee for appendectomy? \$601; for T & A \$248. Simply punch up Myhealthscore.com and click on "hip" and the cost estimate is \$12,000. Using the CPT (Current Procedural Terminology) as a data base, Mr. Pickering hoped to generate some income by offering doctors the opportunity to be listed on the site. The American Medical Association was not happy with Mr. Pickering. It

ordered him to shut down or pay hefty royalties, or else be prepared to go to court. He surrendered. "I can't afford to fight the AMA." The AMA first published the CPT in 1966 when it was one of several competing coding systems, but through the years it has eclipsed its rivals and now has more than 7,000 five digit codes for procedures. The AMA's complaint is weakened because it isn't trying to stop the use of the CPT, and encourages widespread use, but it must be on AMA terms. That means protecting the copyright, which is very hard to do since it has even given away use at times, and the internet is like a huge book on everybody's library shelf. Meanwhile, back on Capitol hill, a bill that would expand legal protection of large databases is pending, supported by Realtors, legal-information providers, the AMA, and many newspaper publishers.

## If At First You Don't Recede, Diet, Diet Again.

A study by the National Institute on Aging evaluated midlife eating habits to brain function. Surprisingly, they were able to relate habitual consumption of tofu to brain atrophy. Extensive case studies were done involving testing brains of people which had been tracked during the 1960s and 70s for various other purposes related to dietary habits. The Institute found that fans of bean curd scored lower on cognitive tests and had lower brain weight than people who eschewed tofu. No attempts were made to associate vegetarians with use of more air freshener.

## I'm For Helping The Elderly. I Might Be Old Myself One Day.

Australia has a drug insurance program that makes sense. Economists estimate that the program costs about 1/3 less than other developed countries. Medications are evaluated for economic benefits against the cost. When a drug is approved by the Aussie FDA, a committee evaluates it compared to alternative medicine already subsidized. The manufacturer puts a price on the product which the committee can dispute if it feels the cost outweighs the benefit to the community. If a drug is approved, the government subsidy applies, but if not the patient must pay the full price. Obviously, the program has global drug makers on edge, because other nations may use Australia as a model. *Viagra* was not approved, partly based upon comparison with an approved injectable compound, but more because it was felt physicians would prescribe it for recreational use, and expenditures would balloon. In effect, the cost to taxpayers would outweigh the benefit to those who have a medical need for it. This could prove hard on Pfizer.

## The Best Way To Double Your Money Is To Fold It In Half And Put It Back In Your Pocket.

The state of Oregon has a government run lottery which is supposed to generate income for economic development, but has frequently been used to fund education. Recently, the lottery has not been producing the money expected, and the explanation is that people are spending their gambling bucks in the casinos attached to the Indian reservations. To lure dreamers back to the numbers game, the state is spending well over a million taxpayer dollars to advertise the lottery. Granted that my perspective is a bit old-fashioned, but is there something inherently weird about the state using tax dollars to encourage absurd gambling to fatten the state coffers? Did the cash for the ads come out of the education budget?

## ADDENDA

- ❖ The first known contraceptive was crocodile dung, used by Egyptians in 2000 B.C.
- ❖ According to the American Bar Association, nearly 700,000 people were arrested for marijuana violations in 1998 - more than all arrests for murder, rape, robbery and aggravated assault combined.
- ❖ Al Gore on attacking Bush- "A zebra cannot change its spots."
- ❖ British politician's metaphor for the millennium - "All along the untrodden paths of the future, I can see the footprints of an unseen hand."
- ❖ Preparation "I" - a compound used to shrink inflated egos.
- ❖ Hotel sign in Acapulco - "The manager has personally passed all the water served here."

Aloha and keep the faith —rts■

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