

HOW TO ANNOY THE HEALTH CRUSADERS

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We live in a time of joining crusades and rallying to causes, all of which seem intent on proving that life today is serious. Special commissions, proliferating committees and task forces, gloom forecasters, protective organizations, and assorted busybodies now outnumber the population; and it is the determined mission of all these zealots to make life even more serious. The basic commodity being promoted is fear, and, in particular, the fear of dying. Hiding behind every acronym are groups of crusaders, all certain that they know what's best for you, and they are eager to regulate what you eat, what you drink, what you breathe, what you wear and how you live.

Most of our health busybodies (and there are a great number in medicine) are uncritical accepters of the statistic. For example, the annual mortality rate from heart attack in women over 40 who still take the pill and smoke is 4 times as great as for those who smoke and don't take the pill; and about 10 times as great as for those who do neither. It sounds frightening enough to gladden the heart of any anti-smoking or anti-pill enthusiast. What the statistics actually show for this age group—the group with the highest mortality—are 60 deaths per 100,000 compared to 16 deaths per 100,000 for smokers who use and don't use the pill; for non smokers, the figures are 11 deaths per 100,000 to 7 deaths per 100,000 for those who use and don't use the pill. With odds of 1600 or more to 1, any professional gambler or insurance company would be more than happy to write book on you. Even pari-mutuel betting machines won't register odds above 999 to 1.

On the other hand, here is another batch of statistics that health crusaders studiously ignore. The leading cause of mortality for young males in the age group of 15 to 24 years is violence (accident, suicide, homicide). Last year 3,364 deaths per 100,000 occurred in this age group, and of this number, 1,468 resulted from motor accidents alone. The comparable overall figure for Sweden in this same age group is 612 per 100,000. Now don't laugh, GASP would rather worry about your inhaling someone else's smoke.

If some disease like the galloping Oriental Crud appeared and knocked off this number of 18-year-old American boys each year, not only the busybodies, but the public, the press and the politicians would be up in arms and screaming for the medical profession to do something about it. Witness the alarm, the nationwide panic and the vast expenditure of time, money and effort generated recently by just the threat of a swine flu epidemic. Even when polio epidemics were at their worst, the death rate from polio in this age group was less than 50 per 100,000.

It doesn't make sense, but the public tolerates this violent type of carnage with indifference and resignation. Any parent who can overlook the possibility that an otherwise healthy son has 1 to 2 chances in 100 of dying before 25 in the car he or his friend got at 16, while at the same time can allow himself to be frightened silly by publicity-seeking, alarmist crusaders who tell him to stop smoking, stop drinking and stop eating meat, sugar, fat or whatever because he might die at 68 instead of 70 from the cancer or stroke that will get him anyway, has got to be an idiot.

The only thing serious about all of this confusion in values is the unsmiling persistence of crusading busybodies who strain at mites and swallow elephants. Remind us to blow cigarette smoke at them in the elevator tomorrow.

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