

The Year in Fear

By ACSH Staff — August 2, 2005

It might be nice if all scientific debates were conducted quietly, with no media attention to them at all. Instead, we get varying levels of media attention, each bringing a different degree of distortion to the underlying facts (as a random grab-bag of odd science and health stories from 2005 remind us) but occasionally offering enlightenment:

☺The worst-case scenario is a media circus like the spat between Tom Cruise and Brooke Shields over the value of psychiatry, with Cruise pushing the Scientology party line that psychiatry is sinister and destructive -- though he left out the embarrassing details about Scientology's claims that psychiatry distracts us from the true source of human misery: invisible space aliens called Thetans. Scientologists must have had a fun summer at the movies, given Cruise's big-budget battle against alien invaders in *War of the Worlds* and his fiancée Katie Holmes' battle against an evil psychiatrist called the Scarecrow in *Batman Begins*.

☺Vegans, not to be confused with Thetans, should be more pleased by a couple of recent parodies of sci-fi films: the attack on factory farming at <http://www.TheMeatrix.com/> ^[1] and the grossly unscientific -- but undeniably funny -- organic farming propaganda short at <http://www.StoreWars.org> ^[2] (featuring Cuke Skywalker, Chewbroccoli, and others).

☺Would that the animal rights activists at People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) had equally good senses of humor. They might then avoid the arrogant self-righteousness that gets them into scandalous spats -- like one over their surprising decision to kill numerous animals in their care while implying that they protect all such critters from a cruel human-dominated world (here is their rebuttal to the charge, as noted by the significantly funnier group ConsumerFreedom): <http://www.petakillsanimals.com/petarebuttal.cfm> ^[3] .

☺Of course, heartstrings are tugged and knee-jerk positions are quickly adopted when cute animals are imperiled or when children are at risk, as the folks at Spiked-Online note in two recent pieces about [hasty accusations](#) ^[4] of [child abuse](#) ^[5] in England.

☺While online spats over science and health-related matters can get ugly, the vastness of the Internet also affords room, it should be noted, for blogs containing reasoned personal reflections about coping with health problems, which can help diminish fear. Or as Marisa Weiss, oncologist and founder of <http://BreastCancer.org> ^[6] put it (when quoted in the May 4, 2005 *Wall Street Journal* article "Blogging from Your Sickbed" by Laura Landro): "All personal stories about health issues, including those in blogs, are clinical studies with a sample size of one." On a similar note, services such as <http://CarePages.com> ^[7] now enable patients and families of patients to update well-wishers on their progress. Not a bad antidote to anxiety.

☺Speaking of drawing conclusions from personal experience, often a risky practice in matters of

science, a May 23, 2005 Associated Press article by Noreen Gillespie -- about Connecticut politicians attempting to ban junk food from schools -- contains a reminder that for good or ill, the most influential narrative for shaping one's views on public policy is usual one's own (and sometimes, as in this case, it even leads to the right conclusion):

Some are unconvinced the initiative is the right way to approach the obesity problem. Rep. Konstantinos Diamantis, D-Bristol, said he weighed 240 pounds as an eighth-grader and couldn't play sports because of weight limits. He lost the weight through willpower.

"There's a host of things that go into it," he said. "Banning a particular food isn't going to teach a child a proper form of nutrition."

∅On the other hand, sometimes it's precisely when health disputes become the subject of impersonal, universal brouhaha that people sit back to do some rational compare-and-contrast, as in [this column on food and smoking](#) [8] from the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

[O]besity and what to do about it has become a moral crusade rather than an objective scientific discussion. Taxes on junk food is one example of suggestions with little or no scientific support. The assumption is that junk food (which is impossible to define) has a similar health risk to tobacco and can be dealt with in the same way that we dealt with cigarettes. Wrong. Food is not tobacco. People need food; they don't need cigarettes. Smoking has been reduced largely because it has become socially unacceptable to smoke in public.

∅On a similar note, a writer at [Pantagraph.com](#) wisely concludes that [soft drinks don't need warning labels](#) [9], despite the latest scare campaign from the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI).

∅Does all the blogging and cyber-bickering have any impact on, say, decision-making in Washington, DC? Hard to be sure, but chronicling that impact is the goal of a bold new blog-about-blogging by Danny Glover -- not the actor but the managing editor of *National Journal's* Technology Daily : <http://beltwayblogroll.nationaljournal.com/> [10] .

Still, I suppose the proper way to examine health issues is with cautious, quiet, peer-reviewed looks at the consensus of science, as with the informative journal article on [osteoporosis and its treatment](#) [11] written by Felicia Cosman, M.D., that appeared recently on [Medscape.com](#) -- and cited ACSH, always a sure sign of quality info amid the tumult.

*Of course, you can't blame the public for having fuzzy ideas about where the dividing line lies between science and science fiction. The fuzziness is widespread enough that [ScientificAmerican.com](#) felt the need to post a fifteen-point refutation of the increasingly popular

"intelligent design" movement, which contends -- based mostly on gut instinct, subjective feelings of awe, and a dash of religion -- that biological mechanisms cannot have arisen through natural selection alone: http://www.sciam.com/print_version.cfm?articleID=000D4FEC-7D5B-1D07-8E49809EC588EEDF [12] . And real science can be just as odd as sci-fi or pseudoscience sometimes. Witness this soundfile from NASA of the natural radio emissions from the poles of Saturn, which sound for all the world like flying saucers from a 1950s thriller: http://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/cassini/multimedia/pia07966.html [13] .

Todd Seavey is the editor of HealthFactsAndFears.com [14] and Director of Publications at the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH.org [15]).

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[1] <http://www.TheMeatrix.com/>

[2] <http://www.StoreWars.org>

[3] <http://www.petakillsanimals.com/petarebuttal.cfm>

[4] <http://www.spiked-online.com/articles/0000000CAC22.htm>

[5] <http://www.spiked-online.com/articles/0000000CAC20.htm>

[6] <http://BreastCancer.org>

[7] <http://CarePages.com>

[8] <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2005/05/19/1116361673807.html>

[9] http://www.pantagraph.com/stories/072705/opi_20050727002.shtml

[10] <http://beltwayblogroll.nationaljournal.com/>

[11] <http://www.medscape.com/viewprogram/4011>

[12] http://www.sciam.com/print_version.cfm?articleID=000D4FEC-7D5B-1D07-8E49809EC588EEDF

[13] http://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/cassini/multimedia/pia07966.html

[14] <http://healthfactsandfears.com>

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