

Excuse Me, I Think My Bacon is Burning

By William C. Miller III—Bethesda, Maryland

I wish I had a dime for every time I heard someone say “Follow the science,” while discussing a current issue. While it is generally good advice, “the Science” can be pretty scary for the uninitiated. Anyone who has read the insert that accompanies their medication (small print documentation written by lawyers with all of the poor readability of an IBM computer manual) knows what I’m talking about. Enter the concepts of cost/benefit and risk analysis. Consciously or without much thought, we routinely make judgments about how much risk we are willing to take in our everyday life. For example, you made such a calculation the first thing when you got out of bed this morning. Depending on how your day went, staying in bed may have been the better choice... but it was pretty much your choice and that is as it should be.

Similarly, routine but necessary trips to and from the grocery store or the drug store are not without risk. There is no shortage of crazy drivers on the road, buildings and bridges topple without warning, airplanes and space debris fall out of the sky, and your chance of being struck by lightning¹ is estimated to be 1 in 600,000.² Stuff happens and being at the wrong place at the wrong time can be life altering.

On a personal note, I’ve made the conscious decision to never jump out of a perfectly good airplane, and I’m not fond of flying anyway. While the statisticians assure us that air travel is safer than traveling by car, the statistics are of little comfort if it is your plane that goes down. Similarly, I have no plans to leap off into space tethered only and grounded theoretically by an industrial grade bungee cord. In both cases and in my opinion, the risk is greater than the benefit, and I get my thrills, satisfaction, and fulfillment via tamer pursuits. For example, I readily accept the risk associated with gardening and growing azaleas, because I judge there is considerable benefit to be had, and I’m very careful.³ The marvelous thing about Science is that it is not static. There really isn’t such a thing as “settled Science.” Facts and theories are re-tested, new data is collected, and the Science is re-evaluated. The result is that our understanding of the world evolves over time, and sometimes new results lead to a reversal of even long-held truths.

Growing up and living in Bethesda, Maryland, a northwest suburb of Washington, DC, I have been afforded a front-row seat to the activities and actions of our national government. While our representative republic form of government is not without problems and short-comings, it has actually served us rather well, despite the fact that, from time to time, keen observers are often left wondering... “Hmm, what were the politicians thinking when they passed that bill?” Fortunately, we have the means to monitor what our representatives say and do in the form of the Congressional Record.⁴ By custom and in accordance with the rules, Members (i.e., Members of the House of Representatives and Members of the Senate) “debate” legislation and make speeches often using “flowery,” highly respectful, and somewhat “stilted” language which borders on comical by today’s standards. It is a common practice for Members to “revise and extend” their remarks and to add or insert material into the record.

The Hawkins Letter to the Editor

On Monday, February 6, 1978, Virginia M. Hawkins published a letter to the editor in the *Washington Post*, p A-22. It was entitled “These Days of Dangerous Living.” Her remarks did not pass unnoticed because her letter was inserted into the Congressional Record, February 8, 1978, pp. 2848-2849, in comments by Joseph David Waggoner, Jr, a Democratic Representative for the 4th congressional district in northwest Louisiana in debate over H.R.6805 - Consumer Protection Act.⁵ Mr. Waggoner rose to speak against the proposed legislation. The case against the creation of the proposed small government agency seemed to be the belief that small agencies of doubtful usefulness invariably turn into large and expensive government agencies of doubtful usefulness, and that once such agencies are created they represent the closest thing to perpetual life. Ms. Hawkins’ letter to the editor is reproduced here as it was published in the *Post*.

These Days of Dangerous Living

Every day we face a barrage of scare stories about how dangerous it is to be alive. We are told that eggs,

butter, whole milk, and other animal fats can kill us; nitrate, used to cure bacon and to preserve a variety of other meats forms nitrosamines, which are carcinogenic. Coffee raises our blood pressure (I suppose that also applies to colas and tea, which also contain caffeine). Hot dogs and other foods colored with Red Dye No. 2 cause cancer, too, they say. Salt is bad; sugar is pure poison. Cattle and poultry are fattened on carcinogenic chemicals (now their feed is being supplemented with concrete dust, but, so far, no one has discovered what ailment that will cause.

Tobacco and alcohol can kill you; so can hair dyes. Fluorocarbon aerosols and supersonic planes destroy the radiation-shielding ozone, and burning fossil fuels increases atmospheric carbon monoxide. The oceans are dying and the earth is becoming a huge pile of garbage.

The “pill” causes blood clots and strokes. Our drinking water may contain as many as 72 harmful industrial chemicals. Leaded gasoline is poisoning the air. Fireproof clothing for children causes cancer. Liquid-protein diets can kill you. Bacteria are becoming resistant to antibiotics. Asbestos is bad stuff. Radiation is all around us—microwave ovens, television sets, dental and other X-rays, smoke detectors, and so forth.

Depending on which story appeals to you, we are either entering a new ice age or the carbon monoxide we are pouring into the atmosphere will result in a “greenhouse” effect that will melt the icecaps and raise the level of the oceans, inundating half the land masses in the world. Either way, there won’t be enough agricultural land to feed the projected world population, so we might as well eat, smoke, drink, dye our hair, and be as merry as possible under the circumstances.

Excuse me, I think my bacon is burning.

VIRGINIA M. HAWKINS

Washington

Conclusion

While I was not able to learn anything about Ms. Hawkins or her background, I found her attitude resembles my own. Clearly, there is risk associated with everything we do. Fortunately, as in most situations, moderation is a good general practice. Yes, there are risks, but we are probably not in as much peril as some would lead you to believe. For example, while some chemicals are recognized to cause cancer in humans, the carcinogenicity is achieved only at humongous and unrealistic dose

levels not possible outside the controlled laboratory setting. You cannot force-feed a human the large doses of a carcinogen that would be necessary to get a response... like you can with animal models (e.g., a rat or a mouse). Consider aflatoxin, a plant mold byproduct that is so widespread that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) considers it an “uncontrollable contaminant” to the food supply... although the FDA has established actionable limits. Aflatoxin is a mycotoxin (poisonous), a potent carcinogen (can cause cancer), and a mutagen (something that can induce or increase the frequency of mutations); and it can be found in corn and corn products; beans; rice; wheat and wheat products; peanuts, peanut butter, and peanut oil; dairy products and eggs from animals fed contaminated feed; dried fruits; tree nuts like walnuts, pecans, and pistachios; and certain spices. Unfortunately, even with advanced post processing designed to remove aflatoxin, a lot of foods that make up a typical western diet (my diet) still contain very small amounts. The good news is... the human body is one really complex chemical reaction which has biological systems and pathways that deal with many carcinogenic and toxic substances that we generate internally (e.g., hydrogen peroxide), consume (e.g., aflatoxin and nitrosamines), or are exposed to (e.g., formaldehyde and air pollution).

While risk is a fact of life, we do well to remember that it’s still a beautiful world. My hope is that you will not allow yourself to be stampeded by the grifters, the false prophets, and any Swedish teenager with anger management issues who, in the name of Science, declares that you must follow her instructions and conform because she insists the sky is falling. Sharing Ms. Hawkins’ view of reality, I’m not going to significantly alter my diet. I am going to eat my bacon, peanut butter, rice, and popcorn, enjoy my adult beverages, be merry, and continue my interest in gardening and azaleas. I have evaluated the risk, and it’s my decision in these “days of dangerous living.”

Notes and References

1. “Thunderstorms and Lightning — the Underrated Killers!”, A Preparedness Guide. US Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Weather Service. January 1994.
2. The late Roy Cleveland Sullivan, a Park Ranger in the Shenandoah National Park in Virginia, was struck by lightning seven times from 1942 to 1977 and lived, only to die from a self-in-

flicted gunshot wound in 1983.

3. Some of the typical hazards associated with gardening in Bethesda are: heat stroke, dehydration, first degree burns, disease-carrying insects (specifically deer and lone star ticks), venomous snakes (copperhead), garden pesticides, and the collection of common chemicals and potentially dangerous gardening tools and implements to name a few.

4. *The Congressional Record* is the official record of the proceedings of the US Congress. Article I, Section 5, of the Constitution of the United States requires that "Each house shall keep a Journal of its Proceedings, and from time to time publish the same, excepting such Parts as may in their Judgement require Secrecy; and the Yeas and Nays of the Members of either House on any question shall, at the Desire of one fifth of those Present, be entered on the Journal."

5. H.R.6085, The Consumer Protection Act, was a bill to establish an independent agency within the executive branch for consumer protection in order to secure within the Federal Government effective protection of the interests of consumers. The bill was introduced by Rep. Jack B. Brooks, [D-TX-9] on May 2, 1977 with nine cosponsors and referred to the House Committee on Government Operations on the same day. It was reported to the House from the Committee on Government Operations on May 16, 1977, and considered in the House on February 7, 1978. It died in the House (failed to pass a ye/nay vote) on February 8, 1978.

About the Author:

William C. Miller III is a recipient of the Brookside Gardens Chapter's Frederic P. Lee Commendation (1988) and is twice the recipient of the ASA's Distinguished Service Award (1995 and 2002). He was chairman of the ASA's Glenn Dale Preservation Project, and co-chairman of Dick West's Ten Oaks Glenn Dale Project. He is past president of the Brookside Gardens Chapter, a former vice president of the ASA, a past member of the ASA Board of Directors, past co-chairman of the ASA's Membership Committee, past chairman of the ASA's Public Information Committee, the longest serving member of the ASA's Editorial Advisory Board, and a frequent contributor to *The Azalean*.

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