



Skewed news 2004

David McDonald

A slightly cynical look at the year in medicine, science and health.

Why some politicians are with us longer than you might hope for

According to a McMaster University study, patients suffering from hypertension can lower their blood pressure by performing a series of hand-gripping exercises.

A window of opportunity opened and influenza

Reacting to a major flu shot shortage, some vaccine suppliers in the US raise prices to hospitals and pharmacies tenfold.

What's truly remarkable about these little creatures is that they've managed to develop a communication system as sophisticated as that of the average 8-year-old boy

Ben Wilson, a University of British Columbia zoologist, Lawrence Dill, a Simon Fraser University behavioural ecologist, and 3 European scientists capture the 2004 Ig Nobel for biology for their study of how herring may communicate by "burst pulse sounds," "digestive system venting" and "bubble expulsion from the anal duct region" — in short, by farting.



The next step, of course, is to determine whether it's children themselves who cause cardiovascular disease

A US Women's Health Initiative study concludes that women who have used birth control pills are 17% to 50% less likely to have a cardiovascular disease those those who don't.

Oh, my oncologist is a friendly little fellow, but he has this annoying habit of chewing on the leg of his chair

The *British Medical Journal* reports that dogs have the ability to sniff out cancers.

Well, your lips are certainly a healthy blue colour today, Mr. Wilson ... Mr. Wilson?

Researchers at the US Department of Agriculture report that pterostilbene, an antioxidant found in blueberries, works even better to lower "bad" cholesterol and other fats in the bloodstream than the cholesterol lowering drug ciprofibrate and causes fewer side effects.

Confident industry observers expect sales of multiplacebos to skyrocket

A major review of vitamin studies published in *The Lancet* suggests that people taking certain combinations of antioxidant supplements not only fail to reduce their chances of contracting digestive-system cancers, but actually increase their risks of mortality compared with those taking a placebo.

Refugees

Americans stream into Canadian border cities looking for flu shots.

Next, they might consider adding to the list a willingness to pay \$4.05 plus tax for a venti cappuccino

A research team at Johns Hopkins medical school pushes to have caffeine withdrawal added to the next edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.



Charles Jaffe

Now, if only they could come up with something to provide relief from eating tofu

A pilot study by the McGill University Health Centre suggests consuming large amounts of soy may offer some relief from chronic pain.

"Awright, listen up, you kids out there, when I tell ya this here ginsling stuff knocks out colds faster'n Tie Domi can punch his way through a Swedish field hockey team..."

In the first clinical trial under new regulations for natural health products, the Alberta-developed ginseng-based COLD-fX, promoted by flamboyant hockey commentator and Great Canadian Don Cherry, proves effective in reducing the frequency and severity of the common cold.

Downsize this!

Denying that they are reacting to the furore created by a documentary film *Super Size Me*, McDonalds phases out 7 oz. servings of French fries and 24 oz. soft drinks at its US restaurants.

A cattle farmer writes: “How about attaching a flu shot to each Canadian cow the Americans allow in?”

Health Minister Ujjal Dosanjh announces that Canada is willing to ship several million flu shots south to the vaccine-strapped US, although delivery procedures have yet to be worked out.

Could be an important factor in deciding next year’s Rodent World Series

Researchers at Cornell University Medical Center find that rotator cuff surgery is less effective among rats given pain medication as part of their recovery.

Wanna slip into that hazmat suit and join me in the hot tub?

British public health officials find that one quarter of whirlpool baths in a survey are contaminated with *Legionella*.

Better check again after the hockey strike

A Statistics Canada study, based on 2002 mortality figures, shows the average lifespan of Canadian men increased from 2001 to 77.2 years, while that of women remained steady at 82.1 years.

Unless of course it involves sticking out the gut, making a goofy face, and waddling around the room

Psychologists at the University of Nijmegen in Holland find that people who mimic others’ body language create a desire in that person to want to help the imitator and those around them.

Dear diarrhea

A study conducted by psychologists at Staffordshire and Glasgow Caledonian Universities in the UK reports that people who keep diaries are more likely to suffer from digestive problems, insomnia, headaches, social dysfunction, and “generally feeling crappy” than non-diarists.



Munchies tied to rise in teen obesity?

According to a study by Queen’s University and Health Canada, smoking marijuana has surpassed getting “really drunk” as a favourite recreational activity among 15 year olds.

Tyler! Put that cigar out and take your nap!

The Ontario Medical Association proposes banning smoking in daycares.

Cynics say the real reason is that few customers are in good enough shape to lift them anymore

British candymakers pledge to phase out many of their super-size chocolate bars, some weighing up to 100 g, as part of a campaign against the nation’s ballooning obesity epidemic.

Enough to have sent Dr. Atkins on a major cookie binge

New federal labelling regulations from Health Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency prohibit food sellers from marketing their wares as “low carbohydrate” after Dec. 12, 2005.

Considered a significant breakthrough for cannibals with sensitive stomachs

US researchers discover that the brains of people who die slowly are less acidic that the brains of those who die quickly.

Researchers in Winnipeg are now revising their hypothesis that it’s the water-skiing and golfing on -4° C days that triggers heart attacks

Researchers at the University of Burgundy in France find that the risk of a heart attack doubles among hypertensive patients in cold weather, which they define as below -4° C.

At last, a major breakthrough in the fight against world hunger

A University of Pennsylvania study determines that it’s possible to double the size of pieces of popcorn by lowering cooking pressure.

In fact, one of them now looks a lot like Pierre Pettigrew

Scientists at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute at Rockefeller University in New York use stem cells to grow luxuriant hair on bald mice.



Walking in a winter *@#~!^! wonderland

Researchers at Laval University find that neurotics who constantly gripe about winter weather actually shiver less and cope better than more positive-minded extroverts.

Now if only it could do something about the inflight movie

Thomas DeMarse, a biomedical engineer at the University of Florida, uses rat neurons to create a “brain in a dish,” said to be capable of controlling an aircraft simulator in varying weather conditions.

One theory being tossed around is that people born later in the year have most likely attended one fewer Oktoberfests

A University of Bremen study published in the journal *Naturwissenschaften* reports that those born in May, June or July live, on average, 9 months less than those born in the last 3 months of the year.

On the bright side, the paramedics can reach your house quicker

Researchers at McMaster University in Hamilton report an 18% increase in mortality, primarily from pollution-related heart problems, among people who lived adjacent to busy roads and highways.

A decisive boot in the crystal balls

A British research team concludes that professional mediums possess no real psychic or paranormal powers.

Tastes like ... sushicle

Health Canada recommends that all fish destined for use in sushi first be frozen to -20°C for a week to ensure any possible parasites are truly dead.

The ultimate mystery, of course, remains the adolescent's gym bag

Americans Richard Axel and Linda Buck win the Nobel Prize in medicine for unravelling some of the basic mysteries of smell.

Don't look now, Madge, but Mr. God's-Gift-to-Penguins still has the price tag hanging off his tux

A French study finds that penguins with flipper tags reproduce at about half the rate as unbanded birds.

In Canada, they're called "politicians"

A study appearing in the journal *Science* reports that members of an Amazonian tribe of hunter-gatherers, called the Piraha, have no concepts for, or ability — or even desire — to learn numbering or counting.



One shooter too many and I wake up with these!

A Calgary bar offers female customers a chance to win free breast implants.

Either that or it's just a chunk of pork pie left by a workman

Scientists discover a perhaps previously unknown life form, a "giant virus," dubbed a "mimicking microbe," or Mimivirus, in amoebae in an industrial cooling tower near Bradford, England.

Preliminary findings strongly suggest that each leisure-time walking program begins with but a single step

Researchers at the University of Victoria receive \$94 616 from the federal industry department for a study called "Developing a theory-based leisure-time walking program."

Apparently, the elongated finger has evolved in response to taunts by gangs of swaggering botanists

British researchers find that men who teach "hard" sciences such as mathematics and physics tend to have longer index fingers and lower testosterone levels than those who teach the "softer" sciences.

Next thing you know these people will be demanding to get married!

An organization called the Asexual Visibility and Education Network adopts the slogan "Asexuality: it's not just for amoebas anymore" in an attempt to promote awareness and acceptance of the estimated 1% of people who are attracted to neither sex.

That and a propensity for bleating out show tunes

Researchers at the Oregon Health and Science University in Portland discover a distinct difference in a particular cluster of cells in a region of the hypothalamus of "gay" and "straight" sheep.

Also, they have to wiggle their butts like crazy

Ramesh Balasubramaniam and Michael T. Turvey of the University of Ottawa's School of Human Kinetics win the 2004 Ig Nobel Prize for physics for their study "Coordination Modes in the Multisegmental Dynamics of Hula Hooping," in which they conclude that successful practitioners use "vertical suspensory activity" and "spatiotemporal patterning" of the lower limbs to keep the hoop "in steady oscillation parallel with the ground plane."



Charles Jaffe

Just think of it as sleeping on a giant condom

Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Rochester (NY) find that men who sleep on waterbeds are up to 4 times more likely to suffer fertility problems than those who use conventional mattresses.

Is that a patch on your shoulder, or are you just glad to see me?

Procter & Gamble Pharmaceuticals release the findings of a study of the efficacy of a testosterone patch for women, reporting that subjects experienced a "74% increase in the frequency of total satisfying sexual activity" during the 24 weeks of the study.

David McDonald is an Ottawa writer and satirist.