

SCIENCE

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EDITORIAL

Get-Rich-Quick Science

Science. Dr. Noitall, you are the preeminent expert on get-rich-quick schemes, the man who has sold the London Bridge six times, the man who invented the chain letter and insider trading, and the man who could convince a client to buy an oil well on Mont Blanc.

Noitall. A vast understatement of my true worth.

Science. Are you involved in any new get-rich-quick plans?

Noitall. I'm already involved in the best of them all, the scientifically nonsensical lawsuit.

Science. How does that work?

Noitall. First you pick a public scare, such as high power lines or cellular phones, identify a lovable ignoramus as the plaintiff, and hire the best trial lawyer that money can buy.

Science. But doesn't the plaintiff have to have some logical connection to the illness?

Noitall. Not really. Get someone with a tumor, dizziness, or a birth defect, all of which are common, and then find out if they ever took a pill, have a cellular phone, or visited someone near a high power line. Just be sure that the defendant is a government or a corporation known to have lots of money and that the plaintiff is a "little guy," who will sentimentally be identified as "one of us."

Science. Doesn't the plaintiff have to produce some causal connection between the illness and the proposed cause?

Noitall. Of course not. The new system is that the deep-pocket moneybags are presumed to be guilty and have to prove they are innocent, whereas plaintiffs are presumed to be scientifically correct. Because judges and juries don't understand science, and judges throw out evidence likely to overturn their biases, the plaintiffs have an easy time. If 35 percent of people die of cancer, it should be expected that 35 percent of the people taking a placebo or visiting a friend near a power line should get cancer, but those kinds of statistics seem to baffle judges and juries. They say "the victim is ill, they took the pill, Q.E.D."

Science. But why is it so difficult to explain?

Noitall. Lawyers can always confuse the issue with statistical nonsense. If the plaintiffs had to prove that the pill user or phone user were getting cancer at a much higher rate than normal and that there was some evidence for the new scare, then most of these phony cases could be thrown out of court immediately by any educated judge. However, if you say the plaintiff is innocent until proven guilty and the moneybags is guilty until proven innocent, you then require a company (even one that has spent millions to get its drug approved) to explain laws of probability to a lay jury or judge.

Science. But I've heard that many of these cases eventually are decided against the plaintiff anyway.

Noitall. True, but there's another fact that I'm very proud of in this new get-rich-quick scheme. Court trials are so expensive that the defendants often settle out of court even when they know they are right. Trials are so long and lawyers fees are so high that it is far better to pay up front than go to trial, spend lots of money, and get bad publicity, even if the defendants eventually win. We have legalized blackmail, and it pays.

Science. But doesn't someone pay for this?

Noitall. Sure, but they are called taxpayers, or consumers, or the unemployed (blue-collar workers who lose their jobs). They have no political or legal clout.

Science. Does the nonsensical lawsuit look like a growth industry?

Noitall. Wonderfully so. Because anyone can get three clients and produce a scare, the sky's the limit. Some Gulf War soldiers have discovered that they were exposed to "depleted uranium." If the public is scared by low levels of radiation, it can be terrified by the "absence of radiation."

Science. Is this solving problems or creating them?

Noitall. Solving them. The country won't need health insurance at all. Anyone with common sense can visit a friend near a power line, take a pill (any old pill), buy a cellular phone, or inhale some smog and be able to collect enough money to provide care for the whole family.

Science. What if some people don't like to participate in fraud?

Noitall. Then they are "immorality" deprived because their education or religious background doesn't allow them to participate in moneymaking schemes. These people should be taken care of by the state because their education prevented them from earning a living.

Daniel E. Koshland, Jr.