



This year Chicago had its hottest summer in years, as daily temperatures averaged 24.6° and daily highs 30.3°. In July the heat wave claimed the lives of more than 500 people—mostly elderly, debilitated, or afflicted with terminal illnesses. The

tobacco manufacturers also took some heat as the American Medical Association urged congress to regulate the industry so that “the thousands who die from smoking each year will not be replaced by new smokers.” Then the Food and Drug Administration, threatened with downsizing or even extinction, made antismoking its new cause and declared nicotine a drug of addiction, which caused house speaker Newt Gingrich to comment that the FDA had lost its mind. Later President Clinton declared teenage smoking a terrible problem and proposed to prohibit the sale of cigarettes to minors.

Meanwhile a consensus is developing that children’s exposure to violence on television should be reduced, perhaps by installing

electronic devices that allow parents to block out objectionable programmes. Also harmful was the experience of a man in Florida who woke up from surgery to find that his wrong foot had been amputated. Researchers in Australia report that aluminum added to drinking water can accumulate in rats’ brains, killing off neurons and causing memory loss. American investigators showed that the same results could be obtained in elderly people by a blow on the head of sufficient force to cause loss of consciousness, but only in those carrying the apo-E4 gene for Alzheimer’s disease. In Chicago a man had his ear bitten off by a disgruntled former employee but had it temporarily reattached in the groin—an area where blood supply is profuse.

The census bureau reports that 22.6 million people, nearly one out of 11 US residents, were born in another country, 6.2 million in Mexico. More than one million Americans are in prison, and almost 4.9 million are under correctional supervision or on probation. The average life expectancy of Americans has now risen to 76 years; they are the “fluoride generation,” and according to a dental professor need not lose their teeth, provided they take advantage of new dental hygiene products such as mouthwashes, medicated toothpastes, and tetracycline saturated fibres.

Each year 2782 postmen are bitten by

dogs; and the post office has started a massive campaign, mailing 128 million postcards with warnings for dog owners to keep their dogs under control and with tips for potential victims to remain motionless, let the dogs sniff them, and avoid eye contact. In Chicago a jungle cat that bit a 2 year old girl so badly that she needed 200 stitches was ordered to be killed, but was saved by her owner taking her to another state. Another child, Baby Richard, has now been returned to his original parents, who, despite public indignation, will not allow him contact with his former adoptive parents. The US Senate has cancelled the 55 mile per hour national speed limit imposed since 1974. A Harvard study failed to show a link between silicone breast implants and autoimmune disease, but the lawyers are pressing on with their suits regardless. In Boston a doctor defibrillated himself in his office when he developed a tachyarrhythmia at 160 beats per minute. Republicans in Illinois complain that the city has spent over \$11 million to provide O’Hare airport with plastic sleeve toilet seat covers that are renewed by pressing a button after each use. Finally, Miami beach has installed a wheelchair ramp at the city’s only nudist public beach, as required by the 1990 Disabilities Act.—GEORGE DUNEA, attending physician, Cook County Hospital, Chicago, USA

Unfair to men

At the age of 60 I feel discriminated against: if I were a woman I would be eligible for my old age pension and a whole range of benefits ranging from free travel on public transport to exemption from library fines. This would be equitable if women aged 60 had a shorter life expectancy than men of the same age; but in all Western countries old women outnumber old men—the difference is an amazing five women to every man at the age of 90. Yet argument continues as to the extent that this sex difference in longevity is an innate physiological variation or is mainly attributable to behavioural factors. Certainly much of the premature mortality among men is due to their risk taking, but evidence is accumulating that some of the sex difference is innate.

The distinguished geneticist Sir Cyril Clarke has recently drawn attention (*British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 1995; 102:677) to the effects of the Y chromosome on early embryonic growth. Male embryos grow faster than females from the first week of life, long before the gonads have developed and long before the embryo secretes sex hormones. Clarke and his coauthor Professor Ursula Mittwoch go on to suggest that this

difference in growth rate may be responsible for a lifelong higher metabolic rate in males and a shorter lifespan.

The data on differential longevity are certainly persuasive. In Western countries women live, on average, 5-10 years longer than men, with the biggest difference in the former USSR and the smallest in Greece and Japan. Much of the difference is explained by the risk taking phenomenon: young men are much more likely than young women to die from road accidents, warfare, sports injuries, and suicide. In middle age men have a higher mortality from coronary heart disease, and later on many more men die from lung cancer, reflecting the sex differences in smoking in the first half of this century. Life expectation is still, however, longer for women than for men at the age of 65, when the hormonal advantages of being a woman have long since disappeared (except for those taking long term hormone replacement therapy) and the risk taking difference should be less important. At the age of 65 a woman living in Britain may expect to live a little over 18 years, while a man of the same age may look forward to only 14 years.

Some epidemiologists have claimed that

around half the sex difference in lifespan is related to smoking, in which case we should expect the gap to narrow in the next half century. Other factors are likely to widen the gap: one example is recognition of inequities in the access women have to treatments such as coronary bypass grafting.

The concept of earlier retirement for women goes back to the origins of the old age pension, when a typical husband was older than his wife and it seemed equitable that they should be able to retire together. Today few people manage to stay in employment until the age of 60/65; most are made redundant or offered early retirement long before that. But I hope we can look forward to a better society in which more account would be taken of disadvantaged males who have to struggle to overcome the disadvantage of having only one X chromosome.—TONY SMITH, associate editor, BMJ

