Mel says, “This is swell! But it’s not ideal—it’s a free, grainy PDF.”

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Against Ipecac

Things are looking down for the medicine that brings things up

compiled by Alice Shirrell Kaswell, Improbable Research staff

Among doctors, ipecac—the medication with the most enjoyable name to say aloud—has fallen from favor. Here are two reports describing what happened.

Ipecac: As Lovable as Gastric Lavage

“Ipecac-Induced Emesis and Gastric Lavage are Equally Unpleasant,” D. Tandberg and D.A. Wood, Veterinary And Human Toxicology, vol. 30, no. 2, April 1988, pp. 109–11. The authors, who are at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, report that:

It has been widely held that gastric lavage is more unpleasant than ipecac-induced emesis. In fact, patients are occasionally threatened with large rubber tubes in order to persuade them to drink ipecac. To confirm that this assumption exists, we asked 41 emergency physicians and nurses who had never personally undergone either procedure to estimate the discomfort of each using a 10 cm unsegmented visual analog scale. This “naïve” group thought that gastric lavage would be significantly more unpleasant than ipecac-induced emesis. Using the same methods, we asked 16 health professionals who had undergone both procedures as part of another study to score the recalled unpleasantness of each procedure.... Among normal volunteers, ipecac-induced emesis and gastric lavage are equally unpleasant gastric emptying procedures.

The Demise of Ipecac


Erroneously, ipecac’s clinical effectiveness was often equated with its ability to produce vomiting, which occurred in 85% to 100% of recipients. But the evidence against ipecac efficacy began to mount.
Contents

The features marked with a star (*) are based entirely on material taken straight from standard research (and other Official and Therefore Always Correct) literature. Many of the other articles are genuine, too, but we don’t know which ones.

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Rival suicidologists Martin Voracek and David Lester. They and their rivalry are the subjects of the special section “Lester vs. Voracek” in this issue of the journal. Painting by Nan Swift, Improbable Research staff.

On the Back Cover


Coming Events

(see WWW.IMPROBABLE.COM for details of these and other events)
Australia -- August 2007
Ig Nobel Prize Ceremony -- Oct 4, 2007
Ig Informal Lectures -- Oct 6, 2007
Festival della Scienza -- Genoa, Italy, Oct 2007

Every Day

Read something new and improbable every weekday on the Improbable Research blog, on our web site: WWW.IMPROBABLE.COM
AIR Vents
Exhalations from our readers

NOTE: The opinions expressed here represent the opinions of the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of those who hold other opinions.

How to Be Finicky About Microbes

Harriet Provine writes (in AIR Vents 13:2) that she is “hard pressed to believe the creature on the cover of your January/February 2007 issue represents a microbe, even a spirited one. It more closely resembles a bat.” I myself am hard pressed to believe that that creature could be a bat. It more closely resembles a Scottish terrier.

Louis G. van de Meulebroeck
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
Leuven, Belgium

One: Too Many Wenzes

Why did you publish letters by both Wenze sisters (“Wenze Against Winter” and “Another Wenze Against Winter,” AIR Vents 13:2)? The Wenze sisters clearly miss the point that unfortunately contained several typographical errors and which caused a fair amount of embarrassment for her and a little bit for me. Do you have a policy against publishing letters from sisters, except if they are the Wenze sisters?

Dr. Sheila Prior, M.A.
Director
Draymore Therapy Clinic
Sheltenham, IL

Two: Too Many Wenzes

Why did you publish letters by both Wenze sisters (“Wenze Against Winter” and “Another Wenze Against Winter,” AIR Vents 13:2)? The Wenze sisters clearly miss the point when they criticize people for missing the entire point of Doug Zongker’s paper (“Chicken, Chicken, Chicken,” AIR 12:5). But that is itself beside the point. My sister and I have both submitted letters—good letters, better than most of the letters you do publish, certainly better than the letters by those Wenze sisters—to you many times, and you have failed to publish any of them except for the one by me.

Dr. Angelina Prior, Ph.D., MBA
Consulting Internal Surgeon
Chicago, IL

A Geneticist’s Take on Economics

I would like to suggest that given the nature of the field of economics and the general intent of the Ig Nobel prizes that the winner of the Nobel prize for Economics be automatically the winner of the Ig Nobel prize for the same field (or at least a nominee).

Daniel Kortschak
Department of Genetics
University of Adelaide
Australia

Mel in Barcelona, Corrected Again

I am sorry to do this again. Thank you (yet again) for publishing the photograph from our archives that shows...
Mel during his brief visit to the city of Barcelona in 1929, and especially for publishing the correction. I am very sorry to say that I was not correct in my correction or in the subsequent correction of that correction. Here is the photograph with a true correction, pointing to Mel where he really was. As I wrote in my previous letters, “Unfortunately he is not facing directly the camera, so the identification cannot be 100 percent.” I hope you can print this corrected photograph.

Ramon Corbut
Senior Archivist
Archives of the
Brothers of Historical Institute
Barcelona, Spain

The Nut Quarrel in Oz

Regarding the ongoing interest in the drawing of the quarrel about the nut... I thought you would find this article useful:


Thomas E. Gill

Mel in Oz

I am a limerick scribe (you published one of my limericks in a mini-AIR competition) and a Mel. Here is my photograph. Readers who wish to write Mel complimentary letters, buy him a drink, etc. can direct their enthusiasms to a genuine survivor of the species.

Mel Dickson
Malabar, Australia

A Guide to the Stars

Nobel Laureate
** world’s highest IQ
*** convicted felon
**** misspelled
***** sibling rivalry
****** six stars
******* Ig Nobel Winner

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Improbable Research Review

Improbable theories, experiments, and conclusions

compiled by Dirk Manley, Improbable Research staff

Perilous Peddling

“How Safe is Cycling With a Schoolbag?” S.J. Legg, E. Laurs and D.I. Hedderley, Ergonomics, vol. 46, no. 8, June 20, 2003, pp. 859–69. The authors explain that:

Twenty children cycled as fast as they could around an obstacle course. Each child undertook two separate trials, about an hour apart on a morning of the same day. The children traversed the course one at a time in turn using their own bicycle and wearing their own usual school clothes. For the first trial they did not carry a schoolbag. On the second trial they carried a schoolbag weighing 6 kg. There were no significant differences in the number of cycling errors made by the children when traversing the obstacle course with and without a schoolbag. However, the children generally took longer to complete the course when carrying the schoolbag and stopping distances were greater.

Societal Costs of Birdwatching


[There] needs to be more research on the economical and environmental impacts of this hobby, birdwatching-related disturbance needs to be reduced, and much has to be done to increase the financial contribution of birdwatching to local communities.

Bags 1


Bags 2

“Consumer Perceptions of Shopping Bags,” G. Prendergast, S.W. Ng and L.L. Leung, Marketing Intelligence and Planning, vol. 19, no. 7, November 7, 2001, pp. 475–82. The authors explain that:

There are no published studies relating to shopping bags, therefore, this exploratory study aims to provide an initial insight toward consumer perceptions of shopping bags.

We welcome your suggestions for this column. Please enclose the full citation (no abbreviations!) and, if possible, a copy of the paper.
Improbable Medical Review

Improbable diagnoses, techniques, and research

compiled by Bertha Vanatian, Improbable Research staff

Hypnocontraception Tested

“Hypnocontraception Effectivity Tested,” P. Cepicky, M. Pecena, B. Cepicka, M. Jarolimek and R. Ferenc, Homeostasis in Health and Disease, vol. 33, no. 3, October 1991, pp. 119–23, discussion 123-5. (Thanks to Frank Nice for bringing this to our attention.) The authors, who are at the Institute for the Care of Mother and Child, Prague, Czechoslovakia, explain that:

The effectivity of hypnocontraception was tested in 23 women selected as the most suitable ones from 86 registered interested women. The method was based on experience of the Milanese authors, especially Professor Marchesan. The hypnocontraception was performed in eight sessions, the temporary sterility was suggested for six months with a possibility of prolongation for another six months. In the course of the study 14 out of the 23 treated women became pregnant, seven of them in the course of the first two months and twelve of them in the course of the first six months... Consequently, the effectivity of the procedure applied in this study has been shown as not sufficient to recommend its introduction as a current means of contraception in the general population.

The Lingering Aura of Success


[We studied] 235 articles [that] had been retracted [from 1966 through August 1997]. Retracted articles continue to be cited as valid work in the biomedical literature after publication of the retraction; these citations signal potential problems for biomedical science.

Steak Safety: Silence


There are several logical reasons why the incidence of “cafe coronary” is so much lower in Britain than the United States. Firstly, the British eat less steak, and what they do eat tends to be cut thinner and cooked more, requiring more chewing. Secondly, thanks to the NHS, dentures tend to be better fitting and mastication easier. Lastly, perhaps, the British talk less when eating.

We welcome your suggestions for this column. Please enclose the full citation (no abbreviations!) and, if possible, a copy of the paper.
A Rivalry is Joined: Lester vs. Voracek

compiled by Alice Shirrell Kaswell, AIR staff

The public loves a good rivalry, and Lester versus Voracek is shaping up to be a classic. A senior eminence, entering the graceful descent path of a high-flying career, finds himself challenged by a young, keen archrival.

The senior figure is David Lester, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

The challenger is Martin Voracek, D.Sc., Ph.D., M.Sc., M.Ph., a research resident at the Department of Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy, Statistics and Documentation Branch of the University of Vienna Medical School.

Professor Lester has been a publishing dynamo. His department’s web site proudly notes that he is an expert in abnormal psychology, and also reports that he “writes on all aspects of death, including suicide, murder, the fear of death, life after death, funerals/burials and war.” He publishes studies, too, on many other subjects.

Lester’s Legion of Reports

When we surveyed Professor Lester’s work in early 2004 (see “Way to Go, David Lester,” AIR 10:2), he had published some 835 academic reports about suicide, averaging more than 20 per year. 313 of those appear in the journal Psychological Reports. An additional 211 appeared in Perceptual and Motor Skills, which is the sister journal to Psychological Reports.

Professor Lester had also published hundred other papers on other topics: 193 of them in Psychological Reports (giving him, at that point, a total of 506 articles in that journal), and 71 in its sister journal, Perceptual and Motor Skills. He had also published several hundred articles (some on suicide, some not) in other journals, as well as some 39 books.

Among the many articles authored by David Lester, topics and titles seem to recur, appearing in different journals, and even repetitively in the same journals. He has managed to maintain that pattern.

For a sampler of Professor Lester’s recent work, see “Lester’s Latest : 2005 & 2006,” elsewhere in this issue of the Annals of Improbable Research.
Voracek’s Variety of Interests

Martin Voracek was born in 1966, the year David Lester began publishing academic papers. Dr. Voracek’s first big academic publication, “Wiener Versionen zur Klinischen Applikation des Mehrfachwahl-Wortschatz-Intelligenztests,” appeared in 1996 in the Wiener Klinische Wochenschrift.

Dr. Voracek’s interests appear to be more diverse then those of his archrival. Dr. Voracek’s web site lists many of his favorite subjects, including some that are crowd-pleasingly abstruse. These include: implicit attitude measurement; testosterone research (especially as it pertains to the ration of finger lengths); secular increase in IQ (especially the so-called “Lynn-Flynn effect”); and scientometrics.

Lester and Voracek share a professional love of suicidology, the study of suicide.

The younger man has, so far, followed a traditional pattern. He established himself with several years of publications on a diversity of topics. He published regularly in many of the same journals as his rival, often on the similar subjects—including, of course, suicide.


Lester vs. Voracek 1

The Lester criticisms, like the articles they criticize, appeared in Perceptual and Motor Skills. The first took aim at a 2002 Voracek paper called “Evidence for Lack of Change in Seasonality of Suicide from Timis County, Romania.”

“Seasonality of Suicide in Eastern Europe: A comment on ‘Evidence for Lack of Change in Seasonality of Suicide from Timis County, Romania,’” D. Lester and F. Moksony, Perceptual and Motor Skills, vol. 96, no. 2, April 2003, pp. 421–2. It says:

Voracek, Vintila, Fisher, and Yip (2002) reported that 1,120 suicides by hanging in one county in Romania from 1980-1999 did not show a decrease in seasonality from the 1980s to the 1990s using a time-series harmonic analysis. They generalized from this sample to the seasonality of suicide in the transitional societies of Eastern Europe in general.

This Comment presents data on all 83,297 suicides (by all methods) in Hungary from 1980-1999. Comparing the numbers of suicides each month in the 1980s and the 1990s (correcting for the extra leap year in the 1980s) showed a significant difference. The seasonal distribution in 1980 showed peaks in August and May. The percentage of suicides in May dropped from 9.94% in the 1980s to 9.70% in the 1990s. The percentage of suicides in July dropped from 9.86% in the 1980s to 9.44% in the 1990s.

Lester vs. Voracek 2

Lester’s other Voracek target was a 2003 paper called “The Finno-Ugrian Suicide Hypothesis: Variation in European Suicide Rates by Latitude and Longitude.”

“Finno-Ugrians, Blood Types and Suicide: Comment on Voracek, Fisher and Marusic,” D. Lester and S.V. Kondrichin, Perceptual and Motor Skills, vol. 98, no. 3, June 2004, p. 814. It says:

In a sample of 20 European nations, the distribution of blood types provided a better explanation for the association of longitude with suicide rates than did the percentage of Finno-Ugrian ethnic group.
Voracek vs. Lester 1

Voracek did not let the opportunity pass. Alert readers of *Perceptual and Motor Skills* must have been electrified to read Voracek’s response to Lester.


Seasonality of suicide in Hungary decreased from the 1980s to the 1990s, supporting the 2003 conclusion of Lester and Moksony. However, it was the strongest ever to be documented with contemporary suicide data, supporting the conjecture of Voracek, et al. (2002) that seasonality of suicide remains high in Eastern Europe. A new hypothesis regarding the co-occurrence of high incidence and strong seasonality of suicide is presented.

Voracek vs. Lester 2

Voracek engaged further, with another study in *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, in which he first praised a much earlier work by Lester, then announced a new, related triumph of his own.


Across 29 European and 10 non-European nations, contemporary suicide rates for men and women were negatively correlated with national proportions of people with Type O blood, thus replicating and extending findings of Lester (1987) and Lester and Kondrichin (2004).

Voracek vs. Lester 3

Voracek also responded to Lester’s other attack.


The variation in contemporary suicide rates for men and women across 20 European nations is, in terms of shared variance, better accounted for by latitude and longitude than by national percentage of Finno-Ugrians and Type O blood, thus supporting the conclusion of Voracek, et al. in 2003 and refuting the supposition of Lester and Kondrichin of 2004.

Voracek vs. Lester 4

Voracek then methodically published a series of studies that refer to other of Lester’s works. Some of these point to possible shortcomings.


This is a comment on the ecological finding of a negative association of national suicide rate and national proportion of people with Type O blood (Lester, 2004). Current knowledge on this topic is reviewed and several problems, limitations and discrepancies within this research line are noted.
Voracek vs. Lester 5
Voracek’s next Lester-related study confirms an earlier report by Lester, but at the same time relegates Lester’s work to an uncomfortably small context.


Across 85 countries around the world, Voracek (2004) found a significant positive relation between estimated national intelligence (IQ) and national male and female suicide rate. The relation was not attenuated when countries’ per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and type of national IQ estimation were statistically controlled. Independently, investigating the total national suicide rate only, Lester (2003) arrived at the same conclusion.

Voracek vs. Lester 6
Voracek then published a study that raises doubt about one of Lester’s great triumphs.


Across 46 nations around the world, suicide rates were negatively correlated with national scores on the Big Five personality factors of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness (two facets indicating low Psychoticism), thus not replicating previous findings of Lester (1993, 2005).

Lester published no response to any of these gambits.

Voracek vs. Lester 7 and 8
Voracek’s two subsequent Lester-related publications contain no direct attacks on the work of his rival. Rather, they pay respectful homage to Lester’s work, while further presenting Voracek as a true peer in their chosen line of research.


Consistent with evidence from several recent geographical (cross-national and within-nation) studies (by Lester and by Voracek), a positive ecological (aggregate-level) correlation of regional intelligence and suicide rate was found across the seven major geographical regions of Denmark.


The present evidence nevertheless adds to several recent findings from international geographical studies by Lester and by Voracek of a positive association of intelligence and suicide mortality by indicating that this pattern may also exist on the within-nation level.

Where from Here?
What are the prospects for one man ultimately triumphing over the other? Things look good, though perhaps deteriorating, for David Lester, if the competition is measured only in number of publications. Lester is approaching two thousand total lifetime publications. Voracek has not yet reached even 200. Lester’s most productive days are behind him, however, and Voracek is accelerating. Of course, sheer number of publications may not be the only measure of how one researcher ranks against another.

The rivalry, now firmly established, appears to have become a tautly run marathon. Each researcher proceeds on his own steam. Both progress determinedly toward the same goal. They have many similar moves; they continue to publish on many of the same topics, and in many of the same journals. Yet each shows his own distinctive style. Their public devours each new publication, savoring the spectacle of two high-powered suicidologists racing at top speed with undying enthusiasm.
Lester’s Latest: 2005 & 2006
Some further works by an under-publicized researcher
compiled by Alice Shirrell Kaswell, AIR staff

Professor David Lester is one of the world’s most productive scholars, if productivity is measured in the number of academic papers published. In early 2004, we glanced at his approximately 1500 published studies (see “Way to Go, David Lester,” AIR 10:2). Here we take a look at some of his subsequent work.

During this recent period, it became clear that Professor Lester has a young rival, a Viennese doctor named Martin Voracek. For a look at the rivalry, some background on the rivals themselves, see “A Rivalry is Joined: Lester vs. Voracek,” elsewhere in this issue of the Annals of Improbable Research.

Lester Since Then
Since that time, Professor Lester has published well more than 100 new studies. Most of them, as per his tradition, and perhaps as a means of encouraging readers to read them, are brief, typically one to three pages in length. Many are based on statistics that are in the public record, and so are easily available to other researchers, but have generally been neglected or overlooked.

Continuing the tradition Professor Lester established early in his career, topics and titles seem to recur, appearing in different journals, and even repetitively in the same journals. Many of his new studies, like many of his older studies, are published in the journal Psychological Reports or in its sister journal, Perceptual and Motor Skills.

Many of the studies are co-authored with his wife, Bijou Yang, who is also known as Bijou Yang Lester. She is Professor of Economics in the Department of Economics and International Business at Drexel University, in Philadelphia. Professor Yang’s web page lists a publication that some may find ironic, given that her husband has been employed in writing many hundreds of reports about suicide:


One of David Lester’s most provocative works, “The Benefits of Artists’ Suicides,” is profiled in the article of that title elsewhere in this issue of the Annals of Improbable Research. Here are a few of his other notable recent publications.

Additions to the Lester Suicide Corpus
Several of these new reports build on achievements that Professor Lester reported in earlier studies. A plurality of them are on the topic of suicide. During 2005 and 2006, Professor Lester published brief, statistics-based reports about suicide in many places, among them the United States, Kuwait, China, Japan, South Korea, Siberia, Spain, France, Scotland, Europe generally and nations generally. One report especially invites comment and study, as it promises to open an entirely new, separate field of academic study:

“National Character, Suicide and Homicide,” David Lester, Perceptual and Motor Skills, vol. 100, no. 3, part 1, 2005, p. 760. Professor Lester reports that:

In a sample of 18 industrialized nations with available data, mean scores on the “big five factors” were not significantly associated with national suicide or homicide rates.

This is an entirely new report, all the more exciting because it echoes his


and also echoes his


and also echoes several other earlier Lester reports.
Among the more cross-disciplinary new studies is one that appears in the *Annals of General Psychiatry*:


Lester/suicide scholars are also intrigued by his “On Being Happy that Someone has Committed Suicide,” David Lester, *Crisis*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2005, pp. 95–6.

Professor Lester also produced studies that will be of special appeal to specialists. He continued his popular suicide-and-bridges series with this:


Earlier favorites in the series include

“Suicide by Jumping From a Bridge,” D. Lester, *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, vol. 97, no. 1, August 2003, p. 338. Professor Lester reports that:

Of the 132 suicides jumping from the Delaware Memorial Bridge from 1952 to the present, the majority were male and from Delaware.

“Do Male and Female Suicides Jump From Different Heights?,” D. Lester, *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, vol. 96, no. 3, part 1, June 2003, p. 798. Professor Lester reports that:

Analysis of data from a small sample of suicides in India indicated no sex difference in the heights from which men and women jumped.

Professor Lester also extended his baseball/suicide series with this new item:


Earlier favorites in that series include:


No support was found for the hypothesis that former major league baseball players do not commit suicide during the baseball season.

Professor Lester also extended several other series on specific statistic-based scholarly aspects of suicide.

So numerous and so diverse are the new Lesterian suicide-related studies that they merit a separate, long appreciation. We leave this task to some dedicated scholar of the Lester corpus.

**A Quick Note: Why They Do It**

Professor Lester also spoke at numerous conferences. At one of them, the 2005 conference of the International Society for Intelligence Research, he summarized his research on the topic “Relationship of IQ to Suicide and Homicide Rate: An International Study.” Professor Lester’s summary:

It was suggested that more intelligent persons kill themselves because of more internal locus of control and that less intelligent persons kill others because of more external locus of control.
Non-Suicide-Related Studies
The rest of this article is a sampling of the 2005-2006 Lester corpus on topics other than suicide.

Difficult to Classify
Professor Lester produced several new studies that are difficult to classify. One can serve as an example of this difficulty:


Lester on Money
Professor Lester continued his popular series of studies related to money. Among them:


“Can Money Buy Happiness?” M. Spinella and D. Lester, *Psychological Reports*, vol. 99, no. 3, 2006, p. 992. The report indicates that persons with low income tend to be more “confused” and “tense” than persons with high income.


Lester on Credit Cards
Professor Lester continued his popular series of studies related to credit cards. Here are three of the new items:


“British and American Attitudes Toward Credit Cards,” B. Yang, S. James and D. Lester, *Psychological Reports*, vol. 98, no. 2, 2006, pp. 385–8. Professor Lester reports that:

American university students owned more than twice as many credit cards as British university students. However, scores on a credit card attitude scale predicted the number of cards owned by respondents in both countries.

Lester on Internet Buying
Professor Lester continued his popular series of studies about people who use the Internet to buy things. Among other things, these reports confirmed Professor Lester’s earlier discovery, which he reported in numerous publications, that (1) people who have access to computers tend to buy more things online than people who don’t have much access to computers and (2) people who have good computer skills tend to buy more things online than people who don’t have good computer skills. The new studies include:


For the men, the only predictor of purchasing products online was the number of hours they spent online. For women, the predictors of making purchases online included anxiety about using computers and attitudes toward money, in addition to the number of hours spent online.


Buying and selling items on eBay was predicted in a sample of 386 undergraduate students from two institutions by computer or Internet skills, year and, for buying items on eBay, sex.


**Lester on Internet Textbook-Buying**

Professor Lester continued his popular series of studies about book-buying on the Internet.

“Sex Differences in Purchasing Textbooks Online,” Bijou Yang and David Lester, *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 21, no. 1, January 2005, pp. 147–52. Professor Lester reports that:

In a series of studies, female students at an urban university tended to demonstrate fewer computer/Internet skills than male students, and their level of skill was a more consistent predictor of purchasing textbooks online. These results were not replicated at a rural state college with less computer-skilled students.

“Buying Books Online: A Replication,” David Lester and Bijou Yang, *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, vol. 102, no. 104, February 2006, pp. 73–4. Professor Lester reports that:

In a replication study, purchasing books online by 137 state college students was predicted by computer/Internet skills.

**Lester on the National Character**

Professor Lester continued his popular series of studies about national character.


Citizens of 22 nations which were rated as more extraverted had more sexual partners and had their first sexual encounter at a younger age than those in nations who were rated as less extraverted.

**Northerners and Southerners**

Professor Lester continued his popular series of studies about northerners and southerners.

“Violence in Northerners and Southerners,” David Lester, *Crisis*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2004, pp. 35–6. Professor Lester reports that:

> There is no evidence that there are consistent differences in rates of suicide and homicide.


> The northern and southern regions of a sample of 26 nations did not differ in birth, marriage or divorce rates.

**Police**

Professor Lester continued his popular series of studies about police. (In this series, one of the most popular items comes from the early days: “Are Police Officers Cynical?”, David Lester, *Criminal Justice Review*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1980, pp. 51–8.) Professor Lester’s newest police study is:


> A pilot study of 33 male and 2 female municipal police officers, most between 30 and 40 years old, found that those whose colleagues more often engage in misconduct experience more excitement and more stress in their work.

However, a discordant note crept into print in that same issue of *Psychological Reports*, with publication of a study by a rival:

“Police Solidarity and Tolerance for Police Misbehavior, Revisited,” Lawrence C. Trostle, *Psychological Reports*, vol. 96, no. 1, 2005, pp. 26–8. Professor Trostle, at the University of Alaska at Anchorage, reports that:

> A small scale replication of Lester and Brink’s (1985) study of police misbehavior was recently conducted with a sample of 125 police officers from Southern California. The findings of this study were diametrically opposed to those of Lester and Brink’s findings.

**Telephone Therapy**

Professor Lester also continued his popular series of studies about telephone therapy.


This e-therapy report builds on an earlier study that we apparently left out of our previous list (in the report in *AIR* 10:2) of Professor Lester’s published studies. That earlier report is the classic:


> The problems facing telephone counseling services who receive calls from men who desire to masturbate while talking to a female are discussed. Some suggestions are made as to how the counselor can handle this type of call, but it is noted that there is no evidence that telephone counseling is feasible with such callers.
Voracek’s Variety
compiled by Alice Shirrell Kaswell, AIR staff

Martin Voracek, D.Sc., Ph.D., M.Sc., M.Ph., is a research resident at the Department of Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy, Statistics and Documentation Branch of the University of Vienna Medical School. He has published more than 100 studies.

For more detail about Dr. Voracek and his rivalry with the prolific David Lester, see “A Rivalry is Joined: Lester vs. Voracek,” elsewhere in this issue of the Annals of Improbable Research.

Here is a sampling of Dr. Voracek’s published research on a variety of topics, including one of his favorites and the subject in which he is most directly competing with David Lester: suicidology.

Romance and Jealousy

Dr. Voracek produced several studies related to romance and jealousy. Here are some of them:


The Clark-Hatfield Proposition Experiment

Dr. Voracek produced two studies related to a famous psychology experiment by Elaine Hatfield and Russell D. Clark III in people were asked, point blank, to have sex with a stranger (for details of the Clark-Hatfield experiment, see “Funny You Should Ask,” AIR 12:1). The Voracek studies are:

reports:

Although frequently cited, there has been no published scientific replication of Clark and Hatfield’s (1989) and Clark’s (1990) findings concerning women’s low receptivity to male strangers’ offers of casual sex. These authors reported a 0% acceptance rate by women. The present research analyzed an informal “real-life” journalistic project initiated by an Austrian magazine, in which results indicated a 6.1% acceptance rate for a complete stranger offering women immediate sexual involvement.


The classic experiments by Clark and Hatfield on sex differences in compliance to offers of dates, apartment visits, and casual sex, and the related informal project of Molzer served as the foundation for the present study. However, whereas individuals in these previous investigations directly approached opposite-sex participants, our research employed surveys to gauge compliance. A sample of 195 male and 179 female Austrian adults were provided with written forms of the Clark and Hatfield scenarios and asked to predict the rates of compliance. Relative to the previous work, the compliance rate of males was overestimated, while that of females was underestimated.

Sun, Seasonality, Solar Eclipses and Suicide
Dr. Voracek, in league with M.L. Fisher, produced several studies related to sun, seasonality, solar eclipses and suicide. These include:


All six suicides on eclipse day were by men and occurred exclusively in the regions crossed by the path of totality, in which unusually large numbers of people gathered.


Color and Suicide
Dr. Voracek looked into the question of suicide and skin tone:


In two previously described samples of 53 and 43 nations, higher suicide rates of men, women, and the elderly population consistently corresponded to lighter skin color. This ecological (aggregate-level) association was independent of national differences in affluence.

Politics, Intelligence, and Suicide
Dr. Voracek produced several studies related to politics, intelligence and suicide. Here are three of them:

“Suicide and General Elections in Austria: Do Preceding Regional Suicide Rate Differentials...”

This finding suggests that variations in preceding regional suicide incidence might be mirrored in subsequent changes in voting behavior.


National IQ was significantly positively related to the national male and female suicide rate.

“Exponential Fitting of Suicide Rate and National Intelligence Estimates,” M. Voracek, *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, vol.102, no. 3, 2006, pp. 896–8. Dr. Voracek reports:

As a rule of thumb, a 5-point shift in national IQ roughly corresponds to a 50% change in the national suicide rate.

**Shapeliness of Women**

Dr. Voracek produced several studies related to women’s body shape:


We looked at the trends in Playboy centrefold models’ body measurements by analysing 577 consecutive monthly issues, from the magazine’s inception in December 1953 to December 2001. We extracted centrefolds’ anthropometric data: height, weight, and measurements for bust, waist, and hip. In sum, centrefold models’ shapely body characteristics have given way to more androgynous ones.


“Success Is All in the Measures: Androgenousness, Curvaceousness, and Starring Frequencies in Adult Media Actresses,” Martin Voracek and Maryanne L. Fisher, *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, vol. 35, no. 3, June 2006, pp. 297–304. (Thanks to Toby Sommer for bringing this to our attention.). Dr. Voracek reports:

The debate of whether body-mass index (BMI) or waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) is the primary visual cue to female physical attractiveness (FPA) has generated considerable interest. However, experiments addressing this question typically have limited ecological validity and do not capture the ultimate goal of FPA, which is to elicit male sexual arousal. Hence, using an unobtrusive measures design, we retrieved movie and magazine starring frequencies of 125 adult media actresses from a company’s database, operationalized starring frequencies as FPA measures, and tested their relationship to actresses’ anthropometric data. Low BMI was related to frequent movie starring, while WHR, waist-to-bust ratio (WBR), and bust size were not. Conversely, low WHR, low WBR, and larger bust size were related to frequent magazine starring, while BMI was not. Visual cues to FPA might be domain-specific, with androgenousness cues salient for
attractiveness evaluation of moving bodies and curvaceousness cues salient for posing bodies.

Finger Length, Generally
Dr. Voracek produced several studies related to finger length. Here are a few of them:


Thumbs, Specifically
Dr. Voracek produced a study concerning thumb length:


Lies
Dr. Voracek collaborated on a large study related to lying:

“A World of Lies,” The Global Deception Research Team [..., Voracek, M., ...], Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, vol. 37, no. 1, 2006, pp. 60–74. The team, including Dr. Voracek, reports:

This article reports two worldwide studies of stereotypes about liars. These studies are carried out in 75 different countries and 43 different languages. In Study 1, participants respond to the open-ended question “How can you tell when people are lying?” In Study 2, participants complete a questionnaire about lying. These two studies reveal a dominant pan-cultural stereotype: that liars avert gaze.

Cricket
Dr. Voracek also investigated the so-called “Miandad effect” as it relates to Pakistan’s cricket performance:


In 2004 Abbasi and Khan reported an enduring influence of a 1986 Pakistani landmark victory in cricket over India on subsequent matches up to 2003. The present study reconsidered the significance and the specificity of this phenomenon, denoted as the “Miandad effect.” All 659 Pakistani cricket encounters with India and other frequently played opponents up to 2005 which yielded a winning team were included in the analysis.... Apparently, the Miandad effect neither generalized to all recurrently encountered opponents, nor was specific to India.
The Economic Art of Suicide

by Alice Shirrell Kaswell, AIR staff

A study called “Artists’ Suicides as a Public Good” explains how we benefit when a famous artist commits suicide. This is one of the rare academic reports that credits Kurt Cobain as its major source of information.

Kurt Cobain, the lead singer of the grunge music group Nirvana, killed himself in 1994 (though, as is traditional when celebrities do themselves in, some people insist it was murder). Professors Samuel Cameron, Bijou Yang and David Lester theorized about the economic consequences of Cobain’s death.

Cameron is an economics professor at the University of Bradford, in the U.K. Yang and Lester are wife and husband, she an economist at Drexel University in Philadelphia, he a psychologist at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

David Lester is the senior figure here. By almost any numerical measure, he is the world’s preeminent suicide researcher. Since 1966, Professor Lester has published more than 800 academic reports about suicide. His articles tend to be brief; many are one or two pages long.

[For a sampler of Professor Lester’s recent work, see “Lester’s Latest — 2005 & 2006” and “A Rivalry is Joined: Lester vs. Voracek,” elsewhere in this issue of the Annals of Improbable Research. For more extensive background, see “Way to Go, David Lester,” AIR 10:2.]

“Artists’ Suicides as a Public Good” is mainly a study in economics, the so-called “dismal science,” but its tone is almost cheerful. “The perspective on suicide from the discipline of economics,” the report says, “has to lead us to the position that suicide may be a good thing.”

The three professors walk us through the debits and credits of Kurt Cobain’s suicide. Mostly, they see credits: increased sales of his music and associated merchandise; increased “iconic value” of the products his fans had already purchased; and a variety of emotional benefits which could theoretically be given a financial value. The musicians associated with Kurt Cobain, especially his wife Courtney Love and her band Hole, also presumably benefit from an increase in attention and perceived value.

Professor Lester and his colleagues point out some further, subtle benefits to Kurt Cobain’s suicide. Cobain, like many iconic musicians, died at 27, early in a human lifespan but perhaps fairly late in a pop singer’s expected career. “The potential productivity of his future artistic productivity may be much less than was generated by his suicide,” they write. “Indeed, it is possible that future mediocre works might have blighted a legacy, leading to negative reappraisals and possibly lower sales of his peak-period work.”

Of suicide in general—and specifically of any me-too suicides that Cobain’s death may have inspired—the professors describe what they see as a higher sort of economic benefit to society. There is, they write, a “selective elimination of those who are unable to cope adequately with the requirements of the environment in which they are trying to survive.”

At the end of the study, Professors Lester, Yang and Cameron mention that they were actually unable to obtain most of the data needed to do their study properly. “Thus,” they write in the report’s final sentence, “at the present time it has been impossible to conduct a methodologically sound study of this phenomenon.”

Reference

“Artists’ Suicides as a Public Good,” Samuel Cameron, Bijou Yang and David Lester, Archives of Suicide Research, vol. 9, no. 4, October–December 2005, pp. 389–96. (Thanks to Tatiana Divens for bringing this to our attention.)
Tips from a Master

by Alice Shirrell Kaswell, AIR staff

How can a researcher stay ahead of the pack? Here are some tips from David Lester, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. Professor Lester has published nearly 2000 studies, books and other academic reports. His recent work is profiled elsewhere in this issue of the *Annals of Improbable Research*. Much of his earlier work is listed pithily in the article “Way to Go, David Lester,” which appeared in *AIR* 10:2

In His Own Words

Professor Lester shared a few of his professional secrets in a long letter published March 9, 2004 in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, under the headline:

Complain, Complain
*A widely published scholar wonders why academics gripe so much about how hard they work*

The letter was his response, he says, to “articles by faculty members who find the academic life too stressful—a point of view I find absurd.”

The letter is meant to educate. “I have made some decisions over the course of my career that have allowed me to be productive, yet not feel overwhelmed,” he confides. Here are some of Professor Lester’s insights:

- “I have not attended a faculty meeting since 1972. I found that I liked my colleagues much better if I did not listen to their silly comments in such meetings.”
- “I used to lunch with colleagues, but I found that their continual complaints about the administration and the students soured my attitude toward the college.”
- “For many years, I had my name removed from the faculty e-mail list so that I had no awareness of what activities were taking place at the college—I missed the president’s Christmas party on several occasions because of that—nor what issues were making the faculty and staff members angry. Now I have had myself placed back on the e-mail list, but I direct all collegewide messages to a folder that I rarely peruse.”
- “I do not pick up the telephone in my office, and my voice-mail message informs callers that I do not check for telephone messages.”
- “I have avoided as much college service as I can in recent years so that I can concentrate on my scholarly work.”

Professor Lester finishes with a passage full of rousing cheer: “Life at this college has enabled me to lead a good life—no, it has been a wonderful life. I have had plenty of time to engage in scholarly activities, and, outside of the college, I have the opportunity to enjoy the world. I am puzzled, therefore, by those who find the academic life to be so hard and so stressful. Perhaps they would have benefited from spending eight hours down a coal mine in their adolescence?”
"The Fruit Fly (Genotype: nevermore)"

Another in an endless series of poems evolved from E.A. Poe’s original

by Jennifer Sosnowski

University of Virginia, Charlottesville

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
O’er the latest volume of some scientific lore,
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of someone gently rapping at my lab’ratory door.

‘Tis some visitor,” I muttered, “tapping at my office door;
Only this, and nothing more.”

Ah, distinctly I remember, it was in the bleak December,
Each lab’ratory member left some data on my door.
Eagerly I wished the morrow; vainly I had sought to borrow
From my books surcease of sorrow, sorrow for my low grant score
For the lab that sought to study Docking Protein v-SNARE-4;
Penniless forevermore.

I felt I would remember later strange sounds from each incubator
Oh, they filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before;
So that now, to still the beating of my heart, I stood repeating,
‘Tis some visitor entreating entrance at my office door,
Some late visitor entreating entrance at my office door.
This it is, and nothing more.”

Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating, then, no longer,
“Sir,” said I, “or madam, your forgiveness I implore;
But the fact is, I was napping, and so gently you came rapping,
And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my lab’ratory door,
That I scarce was sure I heard you.” Here I opened wide the door—.

Darkness there, and nothing more

Deep into the darkness peering, long I stood there, wond’ring, fearing
Doubting, dreaming dreams that no P.I. had dared to dream before;
But the silence was unbroken, and the stillness gave no token,
And the only words there spoken were the whispered words, “Low score?”
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the words, “Low score!”
Merely this, and nothing more.

Back into my office turning, all my soul within me burning,
Soon again I heard a tapping, something louder than before,
“Surely,” I said, “surely, that is someone with word of the status
Of the Golgi apparatus that my grant would fain explore.
Let my heart be still a moment, and this mystery explore.
‘Tis the heating, nothing more.”

I scarce had time all this to mutter, when, with quite a flirt and flutter,
In did zoom a tiny fruit fly, one of Barry’s stocks galore.
Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he;
With a presence calm and staid, he perched above my office door.
Perched upon a bust of Darwin, just above my office door.
Perched, and sat, and nothing more.
Then this little insect brought some cheerful sparkle to my thought
By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore,
“Though thine eyes be red as cherries, surely now thy genome varies.
I’ll bet thou art not wild-type, small one; could you be what I’ve prayed for?
Tell me of thy genotype, named by Barry heretofore.”
Quoth the fruit fly, “Nevermore.”

I wondered and I marveled, merely just to hear it speak so clearly,
As my hopes were raised that I could write my grant once more.
I let myself begin believing—by its genotype perceiving,
Could I finally start achieving fame that I was destined for?
I searched PubMed and rustled through the papers stuffed into my drawer
For a fly named “Nevermore.”

But the fruit fly, sitting lonely on that placid bust, spoke only
That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did outpour.
Nothing further, then, he uttered; not a wingtip did he flutter;
As I dug through all my clutter, piles of papers on the floor.
I despaired and said “It’s hopeless – like my dreams I dreamed before.”
Then the fly said, “Nevermore.”

Startled at the stillness broken by reply so aptly spoken,
“Doubtless,” said I, “what it says is only what it’s heard before,
Caught from some unhappy master, whom unmerciful disaster
Followed fast and followed faster, ‘til his budget was no more—
‘Til the ruins of his research dashed his hopes upon the floor.
His iv’ry tower was no more.”
But the fruit fly still beguiling all my fancy into smiling,
Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of fly and bust and door;
Then, upon the canvas sinking, I betook myself to linking
Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this fly knew of my score,
What this tiny insect who begot so much genetic lore
Meant in croaking, “Nevermore.”

Thus I sat engaged in guessing, finding this a bit distressing,
Whilst I watched those cherry eyes stare down into my deep heart’s core;
So I sat there, sat there pining with florescent light bulbs shining
How low were my hopes declining! This was grant revision four...
I’d be my resignation signing since my grant they did abhor.
Twill ne’er be funded, nevermore!

Then, methought, the air grew colder, and I saw an old file folder
Pull itself out of a stack, and fall upon the dirty floor.
“Wretch,” I cried out, “Who hath sent thee? Gene transfection tests have lent thee
Powers that thy kith and kin have not possessed before!
Come and join my lab and let’s your genotype explore!”
Quoth the fruit fly, “Nevermore!”

“Prophet!” said I, “Thing of evil!—prophet still, if fly or weevil!
Whether you were sent or fled a keen insectivore,
Desolate, yet all undaunted, my grant sits here quite unwanted
In this lab by horror haunted? Tell me truly, I implore!
Is there funding for my lab? Tell me, tell me! I implore!”
Quoth the fruit fly, “Nevermore.”

“Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil—prophet still, if fly or weevil!
By that heaven that’s above us—by that God we both adore—
Tell me—Oh, my heart is chilled!—Now tell me: Will my grant be killed,
My fondest dream go unfulfilled, undone by just a lowly score?
Will I not a full lab build, undone by just a lowly score?
Quoth the fruit fly, “Nevermore.”

“Be that word our sign of parting, fly or fiend!” I shrieked, still smarting—
“Get thee back into thy vial where thou ere hast lived before!
Leave no sign here as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!
Leave my loneliness unbroken!—quit the bust above my door!
Take thy spear from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!”
Quoth the fruit fly, “Nevermore.”

And the fruit fly, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
On the somber bust of Darwin just above my office door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming;
And the lamplight o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted—nevermore!
Plucked from Obscurity: Animal-Sole Shoe

An inventive, yet under-publicized device

by Marina Tsipis, Improbable Research staff

Philip E. McMorrow of Beverly, Massachusetts patented a form of shoe for human feet. U.S. patent #3402483, granted to Mr. McMorrow on September 24, 1968, explains:

This invention relates to footwear and is directed more particularly to footwear for laying simulated animal tracks...

Here are portions of the patent document.
Ig Nobel Invitation

The 17th First Annual
Ig Nobel Prize Ceremony
Thursday evening, October 4, 2007
-- TICKETS go on sale in early August --
The ceremony will be webcast live.

Also:
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For ceremony tickets and/or more info, see www.improbable.com

At the conclusion of the 2006 Ig Nobel Prize Ceremony, the Ig Nobel Prize winners and the Nobel Laureates (who presented the prizes to those winners) stage a pointless photo opportunity. Photo: David Holzman.
Soft Is Hard

*Further evidence why the “soft” sciences are the hardest to do well*

compiled by Alice Shirrell Kaswell and Bissell Mango, Improbable Research staff

**Better Left (Ear)**


The authors state:

A total of 62 participants listened to emotion (e.g., loving) and non-emotion (e.g., combine) words that were dichotically [different sounds were fed into each ear] presented. The results showed a left ear advantage for emotion words.

**On the Goodness of Squares**


Examined whether artistic background and verbal instructions influence the aesthetic preferences for rectangle proportions. Two types of instruction were used, and their effects on both naïve and experienced (art school) students were assessed. Following a subjective instruction, emphasizing personal preference, mean ratings of 12 naïve subjects revealed a preference peak around the Golden Section, whereas mean ratings of 12 experienced viewers peaked at the square. In the objective condition, involving judgment of the goodness of proportion regardless of personal liking, the mean preferences of both groups tended toward the square.... The naïve viewers were significantly more consistent in their ratings than the experienced ones.

**Making Muscles: Strong Business Leadership**

In today’s society, the benefits of exercise and fitness are given much publicity.... [This] study examines the relationship that two types of exercise—running and weightlifting—have with sales volume, extrinsic rewards, and intrinsic rewards. Results indicate that running is related positively to all three outcome variables while weightlifting is related positively to extrinsic and intrinsic rewards but not to sales. Suggestions then are provided for future research.

Eyes on Those Eying the Prize


We examined the effect of an image of a pair of eyes on contributions to an honesty box used to collect money for drinks in a university coffee room. People paid nearly three times as much for their drinks when eyes were displayed rather than a control image.

Making Fun of Patients

Boys Will Be Boys

Research by and for adolescent males of all ages and sexes

compiled by Katherine Lee, Improbable Research staff

Homeland Security Reaches the Anus

“Homeland Security Reaches the Anus,” Sue Clark, Lancet, vol. 369, February 3, 2007, p. 370. (Thanks to Kristine Danowski for bringing this to our attention.) The author, at St Mark’s Hospital, Harrow, UK, explains:

I wish to bring to your attention difficulties one of my patients recently encountered when entering the USA. He is a 48-year-old man with a fistula-in-ano managed with a long-term seton to control perianal sepsis.

A seton consists of a length of suture material knotted to form a loop which lies in the fistula track. It passes through the fistula, out of the external opening beside the anus, into the anus, and re-enters the fistula through the internal opening....

On arrival in New York in August, 2006, for a holiday..., The patient was refused entry into the country unless the seton was removed. Given the somewhat stark choice, he chose removal of the seton, which was done by a doctor at the airport who claimed never to have come across one before. The patient now requires an examination under general anaesthetic to insert a replacement.

I thought I should highlight this rather bizarre manifestation of “homeland security” because I suspect that it might become a more frequent problem.

Many Means of Obtaining Malodors


The Economics of Strategic Virginity Loss


This paper provides the first econometric analysis of rationalizations of virginity loss in terms of love.... In economic terms, a dichotomy is found in terms of male and female virginity loss, such that to a degree it is possible to infer that sex is for males more of a consumption good, whilst for females it is more of a capital good.
Flaccus: Bull


The idea that ‘Horace repeatedly puns on his name’ has recently sprung up again. Flaccus we are told means ‘limp’ and Horace uses his name to make various jokes about impotence. This is a load of cobblers.

Underwear: Inside Views


Defecation and Tight Clothes

“The Effects of Skin Pressure by Clothing on Whole Gut Transit Time and Amount of Feces,” N. Takasu et al., Journal of Physiological Anthropology and Applied Human Science, vol. 19, no. 3, May 2000, pp. 151–6. (Thanks to Alexander Biondo and Helio Autran de Morais for bringing this to our attention.)

Mammoth, Sloth Dung


Swimsuit, Sweater and a Math Test


Two experiments manipulated self-objectification by having participants try on a swimsuit or a sweater.... [As] hypothesized, women in the swimsuit condition performed significantly worse on the math test than did women in the sweater condition, F( 1, 32) = 3.94, p = .056, whereas men’s performance was unaffected by the experimental condition.
Bends on the Learning Curve
Improbable ideas and explanations collected from classrooms
by Richard Lederer

Medical transcriptions show us some unexpected things. Here are a few:

- This is a well-developed elderly female. She is oriented to the year, and unsure of where she is. She is unsure of the president, but mentions Hulk Hogan as a possibility.
- Healthy-appearing decrepit 69-year old male, mentally alert but forgetful.
- Skin: somewhat pale but present.
- Large brown stool ambulating in the hall.
- The patient tells me he has continued to improve every day. He’s still a bit weak when he tries to lift things above his head, but he can easily stick his finger in his ear and carry firewood.

Please send your best specimens, together with sources whenever possible, to Richard Lederer, 10034 Mesa Madera Drive, San Diego, CA 92131 USA

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