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## A cascade of lemmings . . .

Posted on October 7th, 2011 by earleholland

Facts and evidence can be strange things.

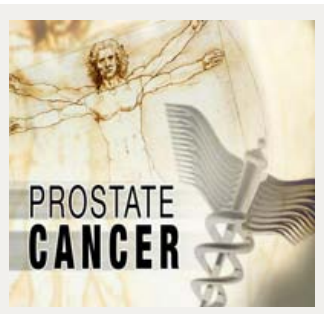
Regardless of what you see when you look up, the sky is not blue. We perceive it as blue because of the way the atmosphere filters the spectrum of light. So the evidence – our eyesight – suggests a blue sky, but it isn't a fact.

In truth, facts and evidence are in a constant battle with faith and perception. Humans tend to be rational beings until what they're told or see runs headlong into what they believe.

Those were the first thoughts that came to mind when hearing about the new proposed guidelines being recommended by the [U.S. Preventative Services Task Force](#) concerning prostate cancer screening. Simply put, the USPSTF suggests men stop getting a widely used cancer screening test.

Their logic: It doesn't save lives and, in many cases, leads to unneeded treatments that can harm patients.

At issue is whether men should add the [PSA test](#) to other assays when offered by their physicians. The test measures the amount of [prostate-specific antigen](#) in the blood as an indicator of whether cancer is present in that male organ. A "normal" value would be less than four nanograms of the antigen in one millimeter of blood. Higher levels might signal a possible problem but that's not an absolute fact.



What the USPSTF was saying was that a PSA test with a higher-than-normal finding is no guarantee that there is a problem that needs treating. Prostate cancer can be slow-growing and cause no substantive problem in many men. The [New York Times reported](#) that autopsies of men 40 to 60 years old showed that one-third had prostate cancer, and that three fourths of men aged 85 or more had the disease. So many men will die with the disease, but not because of it.

But [prostate cancer](#) can also be fast-growing and men with this form of the disease, and who have survived, claim that the PSA test offered an early alert to a condition that could have killed them. For these men, and the countless prostate cancer support organizations and many oncologists, the USPSTF's recommendations are flat-out wrong. For these patients and their docs, the "facts" are that the patients are alive and were "saved," to some extent, by the PSA test.

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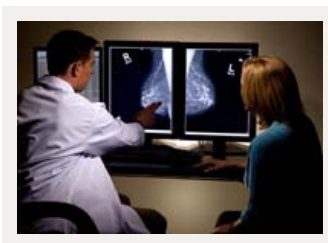
The wrinkle in all of this, however, is that prostate cancer treatments may leave men either impotent or incontinent, or both – two conditions that can be devastating to men who are middle-aged or older. Additionally, at least two large-scale clinical trials, in the US and in Europe, showed that there was little or no difference in the nine-to-10-year survival rate among men, based on whether they had a PSA test or not.

Clearly for men with the fast-growing form of prostate cancer, any early warning – such as the PSA test – is an advantage. But the USPSTF is saying that for those with the slow-growing form, the test could urge men to undergo treatment that could lessen their quality of life.

There's a troubling aspect of *déjà vu* in all of this.

Two years ago, the USPSTF made **another set** of recommendations concerning mammograms for women. As Gary Schwitzer, a former professor at the University of Minnesota, explained in his highly respected *HealthNewsReview Blog*, media coverage of that previous task force recommendation was misreported as suggesting women in their 40s don't need mammograms.

Schwitzer cited the report as actually saying, "*The decision to start regular, biennial screening mammography before the age of 50 years should be an individual one and take into account patient context, including the patient's values regarding specific benefits and harms.*"



In other words, women under 50 should decide on whether to get mammograms after consultation with their doctors!

It's highly likely that prostate cancer survivors, support organizations and some physicians and medical institutions will cry foul at the task force's prostate cancer recommendations. After all, survivors – and their physicians – see their survival as real evidence. That they are alive is a fact.

Cynics will point to the business advantage of additional screening for practitioners and their institutions alike, and in our litigious society, the extra expense of an additional test does remove some of the insecurity that comes with practicing medicine.

As valid as both of those viewpoints are, that's not the issue. The real question is more of how we make decisions, of what role evidence – and in some cases, actual facts – plays in weighing our choices. Humans, and Americans in particular, like simple answers. We like to turn to experts for their opinions, and we often see those opinions as facts.

But when facts and evidence run counter to what we believe – in this case, that any medical screening is a good thing – we too often adhere to our faith and run away like lemmings cascading off a cliff.

And the outcome is often the same. \_\_Earle Holland

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## 5 Responses to “A cascade of lemmings . . .”

[Henry A](#) // Oct 16, 2011 at 9:25 pm

I like your philosophy about the sky not being blue...it makes absolute sense. People tend to call the sky blue, without even checking the facts or having any supporting evidence behind that theory.

[AtlantaWeddingPhotographers](#) // Oct 19, 2011 at 10:14 am

It's indeed that Facts and evidence can be strange things. Thanks for sharing!

[Dentist Tulsa OK](#) // Oct 20, 2011 at 12:58 pm

The PSA Test is not a clear indicator of Cancer. Sometimes these routine tests results, lead to unnecessary treatment, one should allow the body to conduct it's own healing process.

[Dentist Tulsa](#)

[Will Kelly](#) // Dec 6, 2011 at 3:38 pm

Even though PSA tests are only an indicator of what 'could' be wrong, I would rather know that I might have a problem than be ignorant of it. Every man who dies due to a fast growing prostate cancer because they didn't take a PSA test is one man who didn't have to die.

[Ron Bishop](#) // Dec 16, 2011 at 1:19 am

Being a current medical student studying in Australia this is a great article that has given me a better perspective into the sheer numbers of men who can develop this disease sometime in their life, like all diseases it is important for a quick diagnosis and giving the patient the best access to medical help by limiting the risks of reducing their quality of life. many thanks.

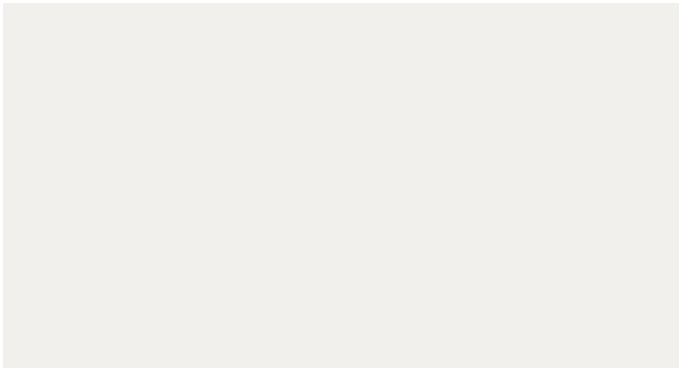
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