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More meds, please . . .

Posted on March 3rd, 2010 by earlehollland

I'm beginning to think that one tool that science writers need to have handy to do their jobs is a standing prescription for anti-anxiety meds. Personally, my blood pressure tends to spike almost daily as I'm forced to question, more and more, the collective intellect of the populace, at least where science is concerned.



Consider the following:

This week, the state senate in South Dakota passed a [resolution](#) calling on public schools that include climate change in their instruction to make sure they balance their teaching with some healthy skepticism. While a similar resolution had passed the state House of Representatives earlier, and neither has the binding authority of law, both pieces of legislation strongly suggest a suspicion over science in that state.

What grabbed most media attention was that the early drafts of the resolution included the following:

“. . . there are a variety of climatological, meteorological, astrological, thermological, cosmological and ecological dynamics that can effect (sic) world weather phenomena and that the significance and interrelativity of these factors is largely speculative;”

While the final version was corrected, much mirth arose over the suggestion that lawmakers there saw a role for “astrology” in deliberations over climate change. We can chuckle that the authors confused astrology with the science of astronomy, but we should also remember that these are the people making laws!

Equally disturbing was the news that [U.S. Senator James Inhofe](#) (R-Oklahoma) was calling for a criminal investigation of 17 scientists who were named in the so-called “[climategate](#)” episode. Speaking during a hearing before the Senate’s environment and public works committee, Inhofe alleged that the researchers had likely violated numerous federal laws by what he considered their scientific misconduct during the affair.

While the [news media](#) were quick to suggest [his allegations](#) were reminiscent of the McCarthy-era anti-communist witch-hunts, the senator’s move was clearly an act intended to intimidate scientists, both those named in his charges and others who focus on climate science. Given that the issue of global climate change has now become more political than

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scientific, this latest attack will produce qualms among researchers now hearing calls for them to be more politically active regarding their science.

And lastly, a new poll from Texas tells us that 30 percent of its citizens believe that dinosaurs and humans walked the earth at the same time and an additional 30 percent answered the question by saying that they simply didn't know!



In a state where supporters of creationism and intelligent design carry substantial weight in policy decisions, it's probably not surprising that the same poll showed that just over half (51 percent) disagreed with the statement, "Human beings, as we know them today, developed from earlier species of animals." Another 14 percent again said that they simply did not know.

The poll, a joint project by researchers at the University of Texas and the self-described, non-profit public media organization, The Texas Tribune, involved 800 registered state voters and was taken in early February of this year.

Taken together, these alone are enough to make me want to reach for the Xanax and Zoloft.

Then comes the word via the magazine Science News of progress in the battle for American science literacy:

"Over the past two decades, science literacy in the United States – an estimate of the share of adults who can follow complex science issues and maybe even render an informed opinion on them – has nearly tripled."

But hold the applause – the rate is still only 28 percent!

More meds, please. __Earle Holland



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James Hathaway // Mar 3, 2010 at 3:13 pm

Well Earle, as you point out at the end of this piece, the problem isn't that people are becoming more ignorant. The problem is that it has once again become acceptable, even laudable to be ignorant, so people are broadcasting their ignorance, rather than hiding it with pollsters by answering "don't know" or "aren't sure." They ARE sure that whatever they think and what their friends think is right, even if people with more

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education (who largely belong to the other political tribe) have evidence to the contrary. Stupid is the new black.

Of course, this "I believe it and that settles it" attitude is not new to America. Remember the "know nothing" party... Eventually, as more and more silly people start shouting silly things, the public becomes embarrassed of these folks and ignorance slinks back into the shadows.

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