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Peter Barss: Ignobel Prize Winner

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Dr. Peter Barss, a Canadian public health physician, has achieved fame and notoriety as one of 2001's Ig Nobel prize winners. The prizes are awarded to the authors of the most oddball research papers in science by the editors of the Annals of Improbable Research, a bimonthly spoof of serious academic journals.

But Dr. Barss, though pleased to be honoured, isn't laughing. His paper on The Danger of Falling Coconuts, published in the British Medical Journal, documents an important source of preventable injury in tropical climates, says Barss who lived in Papua New Guinea for 7 years and Angola for 2 years. "Another main source of injury is people falling out of trees. A coconut palm is about 30 to 35 metres high, which is like falling out of a 10-storey building," said the bearded, bespectacled 55 year-old.

The world is a dangerous place and Dr. Barss has devoted his career to documenting the hazards endemic to specific environments. When he lived in Papua, New Guinea between 1978 and 1985, Barss was the director of a remote provincial hospital, where he was the only doctor for 130,000 people. It was there that he saw and documented tree injuries, using cardboard boxes for medical records and students travelling through as research assistants. Looking at discharge diagnoses he discovered how many head injuries were due to people napping under palm trees. "A coconut hits your skull with the force of a metric tonne," he said, he said noting that the kinetic energy of a falling coconut is almost infinite. "It could seem funny from our perspective, but when you're treating these injuries on a daily basis it's not funny at all."

With an eye to prevention, Barss published his first public health research paper on the risk of grass skirt burns from cooking fires, an article that was published in Lancet. "Women and girls wear loose grass skirts that would catch fire and they'd be severely burned, causing the most serious burns in the province," he said from his chaotic home office in Montreal, where he teaches at McGill University.

Surrounded by the detritus from ongoing renovation of Barss' century old triplex in Montreal, grass skirts and coconut palms seem remote -- especially as Barss' heating hasn't yet been connected . Unperturbed by the cold and the scaffolding inside and out, Barss described how mortal risks are caused by the natural world in developing countries—getting stabbed by a leaping garfish while night fishing, or being eviscerated by a wild boar in the jungle. “People are scared of sharks but we have a lot more trouble with needlefish zipping around under the water like torpedoes,” he said, referring to another published paper on the subject.

Unlike the exotic risks of the tropics, the dangers of the developed world are man-made, according to Barss. He has made a point of designing steps in his house so as to prevent falls and has installed an automatic sprinkler system. “I'm very interested in building safety, and stairs are a very important source of fatal injuries,” he explained, adding that he has lectured medical students on stair safety, using wooden risers and planks as props. “I look at how accidents occur. There's a tendency to neglect prevention, even here,”he said.

Although Barss is earnest and straightforward, he admits that he has a different way of looking at the world, an oblique viewpoint that sees risks where others don't. Perhaps his interest in bizarre injuries began when he was doing cancer research in Chicago with Charles Huggens, another maritimer and Nobel laureate. “I got a really bad bite from a lab rat and decided then that I wanted to work with people,” recalls Barss, who stayed in Chicago to complete a medical degree, subsequently applying his clinical skills in Angola during a guerilla war, where his first daughter was born, in an outpost in Labrador, where his second daughter was born and in Papua New Guinea, where his third daughter was born.

Back in Canada for a few years, Barss now focuses on water safety. The week before he received his Ig Nobel prize at Harvard, Canadian Red Cross honoured him with an award for his work on preventing swimming pool and bathtub injuries. “I do all the drowning research for the Red Cross in Canada, where we have the best data base in the world on water surveillance,” said Barss, noting an 80% drop in infant drownings since the surveillance program began in 1992.

Despite his serious take on prevention, Barss is neither embarrassed nor insulted by the irreverent Ig Nobel award, presented to him during a ceremony characterized by paper airplanes, opera singers and a walk-on character named Sweetie-Poo. “ Life is hard. It's good to have a laugh now and then.”

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