Free Press Viewpoint

Air traffic naps just sign of trouble

High government officials have ignored both science and common sense in their reaction to reports of air traffic controllers asleep at the radar when working overnight shifts alone at airports big and small.

Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood, who forced out the head of the Federal Aviation Administration's air traffic control section, says workers won't be allowed to sleep on his watch.

Controllers suspected of sleeping are being suspended left and right. But that won't solve the problem, rooted in the rotating shifts that controllers work.

And though he's a sorry excuse for a cabinet official, the former Illinois congressman is not alone. Many government agencies and private firms force workers through regular rotating shifts – days, nights and overnight – without a thought of what that does to their sleep cycles or their alertness.

Police officers, airline pilots, truck drivers, railroad operating crews, all work rotating or irregular shifts that destroy sleep cycles. It's not necessary, and as the air traffic controllers have shown us, it could be dangerous. But no one seems to understand.

Sleep scientists long have known that rotating shifts, in particular, give workers fits. Yet, because they otherwise have trouble filling night shifts, and to "be fair," they force all employees to share in the misery. That's barbaric, at best.

"Government officials haven't recognized that people routinely fall asleep at night when their doing shift work," Dr. Charles Czeisler, chief of sleep medicine at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, told the Associated Press. He called claims that air controllers falling asleep were isolated incidents "preposterous."

Rotating shifts ignore two facts: Some people like night work and would volunteer for it. And workers do better on a stable schedule, day or night. Employers could ask for volunteers, then assign junior workers to fill out each shift.

Railroads and some other union operations have done this for years, at least for jobs with a regular start time. While not everyone appreciates night shifts, some would rather have them than days. Forcing everyone to sleep poorly to be "fair" hardly seems right.

Workers with no regular schedule, such as airline pilots, line-haul train crews and over-the-road truckers have a different problem. While government rules have been tightened, they still are subject to call day and night, often with only eight to 10 hours "rest" between trips. Since that includes time to eat, see the family, do business and relax, as well as sleep, it's hardly restful.

One solution for either situation is, yes, allowing workers to nap. Ray LaHood says no, but railroads now allow it. And the secretary is ignoring the best scientific and medical advice and thereby endangering the traveling public.

"There should be sanctioned on-shift napping," says Gregory Belenky, a sleep expert at Washington State University. "That's the way to handle night-shift work."

Since the Department of Transportation regulates so many sleep-deprived occupations, we should expect a more enlightened viewpoint, but apparently, sounding tough is more important to officials than solving the problem.

And this problem should be solved, for the good of us all. Just the thought of being "served" by sleep deprived cops, trainmen, pilots and industrial workers is frightening.

Wake up, Ray, and get with the program.

– Steve Haynes

COLBY FREE PRESS

155 W. Fifth St. (USPS 120-920) (785) 462-3963
Colby, Kan. 67701 fax (785) 462-7749

Send news to: colby.editor @ nwkansas.com

State award-winning newspaper, General Excellence, Design & Layout, Columns, Editorial Writing, Sports Columns, News, Photography.
Official newspaper of Thomas County, Colby, Brewster and Rexford.

Steve Haynes - Publisher
s.haynes @ nwkansas.com

NEWS

Kevin Bottrell - News Editor
kbottrell @ nwkansas.com

Sports
colby.sports @ nwkansas.com

Marian Ballard - Copy Editor
mballard @ nwkansas.com

Shelby Pulkrabek, Tomi Miller - Society Reporters
colby.society @ nwkansas.com

ADVERTISING
colby.ads @ nwkansas.com

Andrea Bowers, Kathryn Ballard
Advertising Representatives
abowers @ nwkansas.com kballard @ nwkansas.com

Kylee Hunter - Graphic Design
khunter @ nwkansas.com

BUSINESS OFFICE

Robin Tubbs - Office Manager
rtubbs @ nwkansas.com

Evan Barnum - Systems Administrator
support @ nwkansas.com

NOR'WEST PRESS

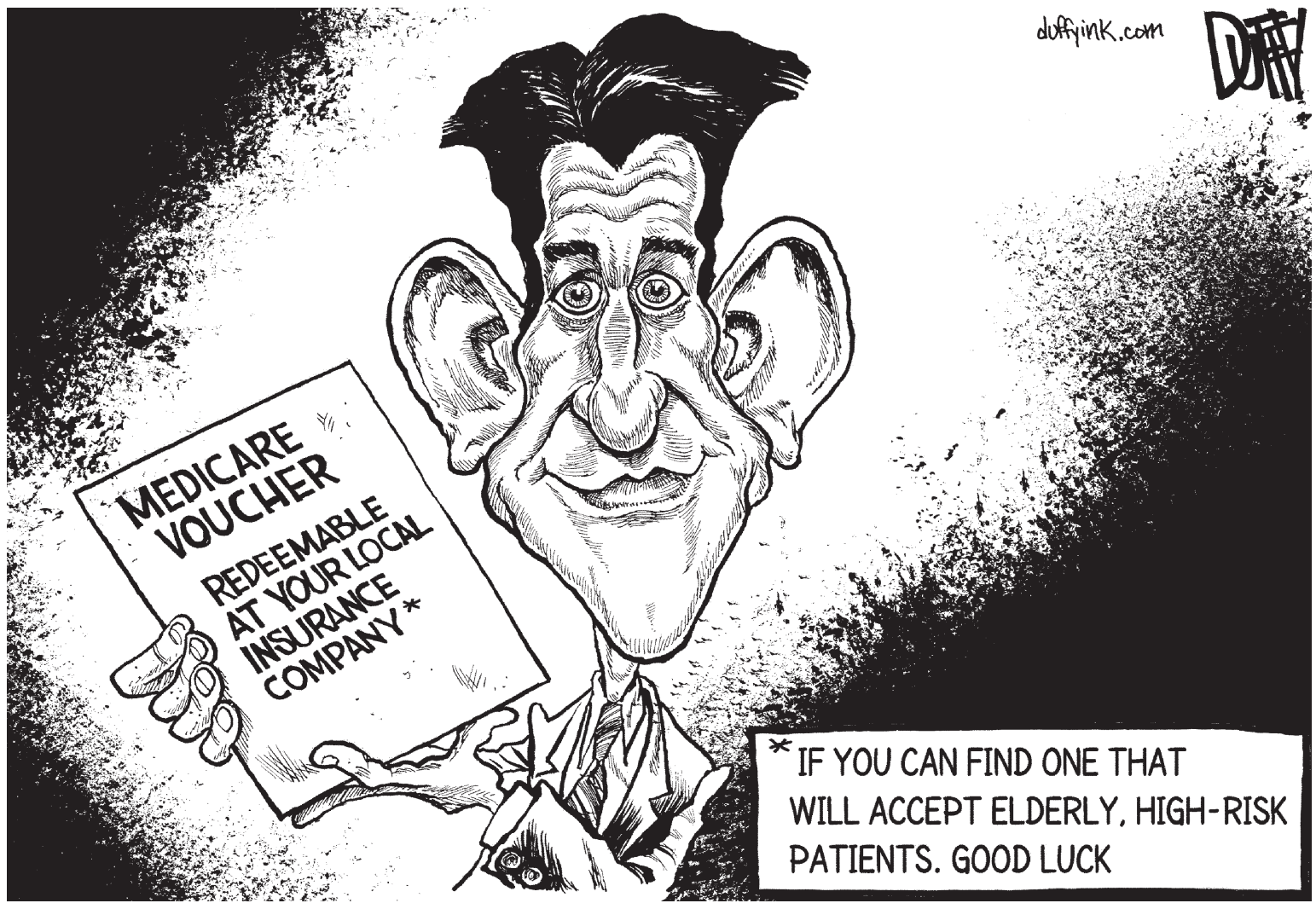
Richard Westfahl - General Manager
Lana Westfahl, Jim Jackson, Betty Morris, Jim Bowker, Judy McKnight, Kris McCool

THE COLBY FREE PRESS (USPS 120-920) is published every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, except the days observed for Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year's Day, by Nor'West Newspaper, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

PERIODICALS POSTAGE paid at Colby, Kan. 67701, and at additional mailing offices. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to Colby Free Press, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

THE BUSINESS OFFICE at 155 W. Fifth is open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Friday, closed Saturday and Sunday. MEMBER OF THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, which is exclusively entitled to the use for publication of all news herein. Member Kansas Press Association and National Newspaper Association.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: In Colby, Thomas County and Oakley: three months $35, one year $85. By mail to ZIP Codes beginning with 676 and 677: three months $39, one year $95. Elsewhere in the U.S., mailed once per week: three months $39, one year $95. Student rate, nine months, in Colby, Thomas County and Oakley, $64; mailed once per week elsewhere in the U.S. $72



Three hats will do it every time

Cynthia Haynes

• Open Season

What do you say to a woman wearing three hats?

Mostly, you just smile and try to act like it's normal.

Of course, some people just have to ask.

I had several ready answers:

"I'm starting a new style."

"They don't fit in my carry-on."

"What hats?"

"Oh, everyone tells me I wear lots of hats, so I do."

We were headed for vacation in Mexico, and I had not one but three large sun hats on my head.

The top one was a nice face-shading sun hat with a cute little purple stuffed gecko stuffed into the band. The next one was Steve's fishing hat. The last was an older, not-so-nice looking sun hat that I could use if I got out on the water and didn't want to lose my good hat in the wind.

None of them packed well, and Steve refuses to wear his hat unless he gets to go fishing.

He never did get to wear his hat, and my old hat didn't get much use either. Fishing was just too expensive, and we aren't much into the other water sports.

My other sun hat got a good workout, however. I wore it all over the place – to the beach, to town, on walks and around the resort.

However, it got its lizard detached on the first trip to town.

Two children came down the street and the little girl looked up and said:

"Ohhh, Ahhh!"

Then she grinned and made can-I-have-it motions at my lizard.

Sure, why not. I don't need a purple stuffed toy stuck in my hat that badly.

So the girl and the gecko headed off down the street and I continued in the other direction with my lizardless hat and smiling husband.

I looked around for another gecko to decorate my sombrero, but couldn't come up with anything.

So, when we returned to the U.S., I went through customs and immigration on the way home wearing the three hats sans purple lizard.

The officials took one look and stamped my passport and waved us through.

Who in their right mind would smuggle anything while wearing three hats?

Cynthia Haynes, co-owner and chief financial officer of Nor'West Newspapers, writes this column weekly. Her pets include cats, toads and a praying mantis. Contact her at c.haynes @ nwkansas.com

Leaders, see bomb test – in undershorts

John Richard Schrock

• Education Frontlines

Do you feel safer with the test ban treaty in place, Walter Cronkite asked during a special broadcast of "Fifty Tears After the Bomb and Counting?"

He was interviewing renowned nuclear scientist Harold Agnew. Agnew's answer caught Cronkite by surprise. He felt we were less secure because the generation of generals who had witnessed a nuclear bomb firsthand had retired. Agnew felt we would be safer if the world's new generals were lined up to witness a real bomb test, in their undershorts.

"Undershorts?"

Agnew said that only when you are face-to-face with a real thermonuclear explosion do you really appreciate the power of that distant inferno. In another interview, he elaborated: "… you don't know what heat is until you've seen the heat from a ten-megaton, fifteen-megaton hydrogen bomb. The most impressive thing about the heat is it doesn't stop, it just gets hotter and hotter and you start to really worry even though you're 20-some miles away…."

Agnew believed that if generals felt the intensity of that distant inferno firsthand, they would never order a thermonuclear bombing. No audio-visuals, no modern media in 3-D, could ever replace the feel of that heat penetrating your body. But, he said, rookie generals whose only imagery of the H-bomb was from conventional weapons and abstract videos made this a more dangerous world.

And therein lies a paradox of science. When science gives us advances – in this case the prolonged absence of nuclear warfare – science often wipes out the very experience base that allows us to have a reasonable and commonsense perspective.

Science chlorinated our water and greatly reduced waterborne diseases. Now, lacking widespread experience with waterborne diseases, some people question chlorination.

Science eliminated polio, smallpox and other major infectious diseases in the United States. Now, a new generation with no experience with serious maladies questions vaccination, readily believing bogus claims that it was never effective.

Science added fluoride to water supplies. The number of children with cavities plummeted. Now that cavities are rare, more citizens question fluoridation.

Computers and the Internet insulate us from real experiences even farther. For such media to be meaningful, we must have real-life experiences.

For instance, assume you are driving home on the Interstate tonight at 80 mph. Up ahead you see an accident has just happened. In your mirror, you can see the ambulance approaching. The officer is waving you to go on by. You can see the driver pinned in the car. It looks serious.

The rest of your trip home is at a slower speed. You have "sobered up." This tragedy pre-occupies your mind. But on the television news that night are images of a disaster somewhere in the world. The death toll is far greater. But that mediated message, just like computers and the Internet, has little impact.

This is the difference Agnew was pointing out. We do not learn by reasoning alone. Learning is an emotional experience embedded in real life. Today we know that a section of our brain is stimulated by emotions and tells us: "This is real. Remember this!"

Real experiences test true and have real consequences. A sheltered and simulated world does not.

In the absence of understanding come ignorance and fear. And ignorance and fear is pretty much all we are getting from most news media reports on the Japanese reactor. Reporters spout nonsense about clouds of radiation and question how you can wash radiation off clothing. Most have no image of radiation beyond their own dental x-rays. They proclaim one milliseivert above ultra-conservative dosage limits to be "dangerous."

I join Harold Agnew in his suggestion that we line up our generals to get an education in nuclear energy. And I would add journalists to the line up – all in their undershorts.

John Richard Schrock, a professor of biology and department chair at a leading teacher's college, lives in Emporia. He emphasizes that his opinions are strictly his own.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley