HEART AND SOUL

The truth about falling coconuts

Falling coconuts, a prop in innumerable comic routines, have finally garnered a little respect, although perhaps not the type a Canadian physician expected. Dr. Peter Barss' paper, "Injuries Due to Falling Coconuts," received an Ig Nobel Award last year in recognition of research that "cannot or should not be replicated."

The only problem is that the paper's author insists that this is a deadly serious topic.

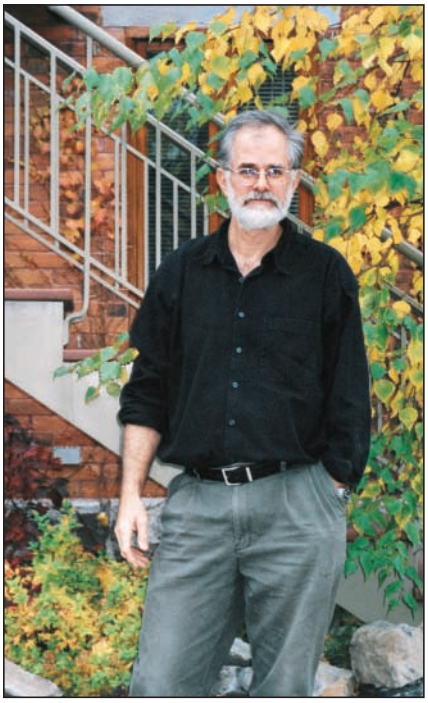
Barss, a Montreal public health physician, received the Ig Nobel at Harvard from the editors of the *Annals of Improbable Research*, a bimonthly spoof of serious academic journals. Although pleased to be honoured, Barss isn't laughing. Barss, who lived in Papua New Guinea for 7 years and Angola for 2 years, says his winning paper, published in the *Journal of Trauma* (1984;24[1]:990-1), documents an important preventable injury in tropical climates.

"Another main source of injury is people falling out of trees," he adds. "A coconut palm is about 35 metres high, which is like falling out of a 10-storey building."

The world is a dangerous place, and Barss has devoted his career to documenting the hazards endemic to specific environments. When he was in Papua New Guinea between 1978 and 1985, he was director of a remote provincial hospital and sole physician for 130 000 people. It was there that he saw and documented the results of tree-related injuries.

Looking at discharge diagnoses, he discovered how many head injuries were occurring because people were napping under palm trees. "It may seem funny from our perspective, but when you're treating these injuries daily, it's not funny at all," he says.

Barss applied the same eye to prevention when he published his first public health research paper in the *Lancet*, which dealt with the risk of burns caused by cooking fires. "Women and girls wore loose grass skirts that would catch fire and they would be severely burned," Barss said during an interview at his Montreal home.



Susan Pinker

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Surrounded by the detritus from ongoing renovation of his century-old triplex, Barss described how mortal risks emerge from the natural world in developing countries — getting stabbed by leaping garfish while fishing, for instance, or being eviscerated by an enraged wild boar while walking 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 his published paper on the subject.

Back in Canada, most of the risks are man-made. Here, Barss has made a point of designing the steps in his house to prevent falls. "I'm very interested in building safety, and stairs are an important source of fatal injuries," he explained, noting that he has lectured medical students on stair safety by using wooden risers and planks as props. "I look at how accidents occur. There's a tendency to neglect prevention, even here."

Barss admits 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. "I got a really bad bite from a lab rat and decided then that I wanted to work with people," recalls Barss.

He went on to apply his clinical skills in Angola during a guerrilla 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).

Barss, who has been back in Canada for a few years, now focuses on water safety. The week before receiving his Ig Nobel, the Canadian Red Cross honoured him with an award for his work preventing swimming pool and bathtub injuries.

"I do the drowning research for the Red Cross in Canada, where we have the best database in the world on water surveillance," said Barss. There has been 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 prize, which he received during a ceremony characterized by paper airplanes, opera singers and a walk-on character named Sweetie-Poo.

"Life is hard," he observed. "It's good to have a laugh now and then." — *Susan Pinker*, Montreal