Science & Technology

Study Hall: Spring/Summer 2018

Research briefs

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Colleen Deng

Weekend ceasefire

Gunshot-related deaths and injuries decline 20 percent on the weekend when the NRA holds its annual convention, apparently because its tens of thousands of attendees temporarily holster their weapons. The new study by Columbia economics PhD student Andrew Olenski and Harvard economist Anupam Jena seems to show that experienced gun users, not just novices, are susceptible to firearm accidents.

Risky waters

Columbia environmental scientists Upmanu Lall and Haowei Wu ’17SEAS have found that between 3 and 10 percent of municipal water systems in the United States are in violation of federal health standards each year. Their study reveals that in 2015, as many as twenty-one million Americans were exposed to unsafe drinking water.

The science of fear

A team of Columbia neuroscientists led by René Hen has identified a group of neurons in mice that are at the root of the brain’s anxiety response. The scientists hope that by further investigating these neurons they will be able to develop new treatments for anxiety disorders.

Tragic reactions

Robin Williams’s suicide in 2014 inspired a wave of copycat deaths, according to a new study by Columbia epidemiology PhD candidate David Fink. In the five months following the comedian’s death, Fink shows, the suicide rate in the US increased by 10 percent and the number of people who killed themselves by asphyxiation (as Williams did) rose by 32 percent. Fink says that US news organizations contributed to the problem by failing to follow World Health Organization guidelines that suggest reporters avoid detailing the suicide methods of celebrities.

Smog-day blues

Air pollution lowers productivity even among white-collar workers who spend their days indoors, say economists Michaela Pagel of Columbia Business School and Steffen Meyer of Germany’s Leibniz University. By analyzing the job performance of more than one hundred thousand private investors from 2003 to 2015, the researchers found that the investors took fewer steps to execute trades on days when smog levels spiked.

Time is ticking away

A new blood test developed by Columbia epidemiologist W. Ian Lipkin promises to revolutionize the diagnosis of tick-borne illnesses. The test, called the Tick-Borne Disease Serochip, will enable medical workers to distinguish between Lyme disease and seven other conditions spread by tick bites much faster and with greater reliability than is possible with current diagnostic methods.



Guide to school abbreviations

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