

Study backs excessive surgery theory

By BRENDA C. COLEMAN
Associated Press Writer

CHICAGO — In parts of Massachusetts, some surgical operations are performed more than twice as often as in other sections of the state, a new study says, bolstering evidence Americans spend unnecessary billions on hospital care.

"You know from your own experience, and your friends', that (in) going to the doctor with a bad back, one will say, 'Go to the hospital for two weeks,' and another will say, 'Go home and put your mattress on the floor for two weeks,'" said the researcher, Dr. Benjamin A. Barnes of Harvard School of Public Health in Boston.

A study by Barnes and his colleagues in today's issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*

indicates 1980 rates of surgery in some parts of Massachusetts were double what they were in others for three procedures: tonsillectomy, insertion of a heart pacemaker and removal of damaged spinal disks.

Two other procedures — hysterectomy without removal of ovaries and surgery to remove knee cartilage — were 90 percent more common in these areas, the study said.

Slight but significant geographical differences emerged for four other procedures: cataract surgery, hysterectomy with removal of ovaries, setting a broken thigh bone and partial removal of the colon and rectum, the study said.

The only procedure for which there was no significant difference was removal of the prostate gland, indicating "far less discretion as to whether it's carried out or not," Barnes said.

nes said.

The Massachusetts study is the first to describe hospital use in a highly populous state with large urban areas and several medical schools, Barnes said. Previous research has been done in Vermont, Rhode Island and Maine.

The study divided Massachusetts into 172 areas, identifying the 20 with the highest rates of surgical procedures and the 20 with the lowest. It found that in high-use areas, patients spent an estimated \$16 million for surgical procedures in excess of the state average.

Some of the highest and lowest rates were in the Boston area.

"These high rates and low rates have to be looked at and reconciled," Barnes said. "Both rates can't be right."

He emphasized that the study did

not try to determine the appropriate rate of surgery for each procedure, only to show the wide variation in rates.

An editorial accompanying the study cautioned that trying to make medical practice patterns conform to any "average" is dangerous because some variations are necessary to ensure good patient care.

"There is a growing zeal to reduce the standards of medical practice to average or below in a climate in which economics alone becomes the holy grail," said the editorial, written by Dr. Joseph F. Boyle, immediate past president of the American Medical Association.

"In the process, the quality of medical care most assuredly will suffer, all innovation will be stifled, and individual professional judgment will be mortally wounded unless we in the

profession provide effective leadership."

Boyle said third-party payors who previously have looked at variations in medical practice envision enormous savings — \$30 billion to \$40 billion a year — if all unnecessary medical care is eliminated.

These estimates "provoke frenzy among the increasingly cost-conscious in both the public and private sector" who want to severely restrict payments for medical care, he said.

Boyle criticized the Massachusetts study, saying its data indicate real possible savings only two-thirds as great as the \$16 million that Barnes and his colleagues estimated — nationally, about \$2.1 billion.

"We were not trying to pin down the exact dollar mark," Barnes responded. "It's \$16 million not \$1,600. It's still a lot of money."

Thieves harvest rural crime

By ROBERT LEE ZIMMER
Associated Press Writer

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — Thieves often join in the farm harvest, pilfering sacks of soybeans and driving away pieces of machinery to the tune of \$500 million a year, and experts say the farmers are often unwitting accomplices.

Unlocked doors, machinery left in fields and keys left in vehicles all help thieves, experts say, and so does the growing tendency for farmers to be away much of the day at other jobs.

"People create a lot of opportunities for crime," said John van Es, a rural sociologist at the University of Illinois.

In fact, farmers are about as likely to be the victims of property crimes as people in large cities, said Joe Donnermeyer, director of the National Rural Crime Prevention Center in Ohio.

Rural crime rates rose faster than urban crime rates during the 1970s, though both have decreased slightly in this decade.

In Illinois, for example, the rural crime index rose 22 percent between 1973 and 1983, while the crime index for cities decreased 2 percent.

Across the country, the most prevalent rural crimes are vandalism and theft.

Clues to future climate sought from stale air

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Add old air to the list of valued antiques.

Scientists, hoping to learn how much carbon dioxide has increased in the atmosphere, have asked museums nationwide to look for historic objects holding sealed air.

"There is some fear that increasing levels of carbon dioxide as the result of increased fossil fuel use will cause severe climate changes because of the so-called greenhouse effect," says Allen Ogard, a researcher at Los Alamos (N.M.) National Laboratory, operated by the University of California for the U.S. Department of Energy.

The greenhouse effect occurs when carbon dioxide traps solar radiation in the atmosphere, raising temperatures worldwide — possibly by several degrees over the next century, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

That could melt polar ice caps and raise the sea level, eroding shorelines, some scientists have speculated.

To measure the increase in carbon dioxide accurately, scientists needed accurate samples of air as it used to be.

"To do that we needed historical air," said co-researcher Jane Poths.

So Los Alamos asked the nation's museums and other institutions to look for such things as old brass buttons, antique telescopes and ancient hour glasses that may contain sealed air from specific periods of history.

Ogard says a sunken river boat in the Mississippi River could have many items containing old air.

"Maritime museums and exhibits have become particularly interesting because of their navigational and optical instruments and hollow brass buttons from officers' uniforms," Ms. Poths says. "There are good historical records for many of these old instruments. We know exactly when some of them were last serviced and resealed."

The Adler Planetarium in Chicago yielded a 17th century hour glass.

Researchers also found "some drug bottles in Maine" that were sealed close to 100 years ago.

But pickings have been slim, Ogard conceded.

"We are finding that most things that can be opened, have been."

Just a test:

Scientists call artificial comet a success

By LEE SIEGEL
AP Science Writer

LOS ANGELES — A man-made comet launched over the Pacific Ocean was visible from Texas to Peru, and scientists called the experiment a success yesterday despite a fire that destroyed a NASA observation plane on the ground.

The creation of the artificial comet 74,000 miles above the ocean was the last in a \$78 million, international series of eight experiments designed to study how Earth's magnetic field is affected by the solar wind, an electrically charged gas that speeds from the sun at nearly 1 million mph.

'The theoreticians are having a ball with the data.' ... It was seen by amateur astronomers in Phoenix, Ariz., who 'said it began as a light green color, then turned red, persisted for several minutes and developed a very visible tail.'

Gilbert Ousley, project manager

"The theoreticians are having a ball with the data," project manager Gilbert Ousley said in a telephone interview from the Washington, D.C., headquarters of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

"Some very good observations were made of the comet," said Johns Hopkins University researcher Richard McEntire, in a telephone interview from Baltimore. A West German satellite released two canisters of the

metallic element barium at 8:50 p.m. PDT Wednesday from a point high above the Pacific off Tahiti. At 9 p.m. PDT, the canisters released the barium, which glowed as it was energized by solar wind, forming the artificial comet.

The man-made comet — the second ever launched — measured about 250 miles in diameter and sprouted a tail 4,500 miles long, somewhat smaller than the first man-made comet, which was created last Dec. 27 but wasn't visible to most ground observers because of cloudy weather, Ousley said.

He said four crew members and 15 scientists from NASA's Ames Research Center in Mountain View, Calif., escaped without injury as NASA's four-engine Convair 990 flying observatory blew a tire and then caught fire as it rolled down the runway at March Air Force Base, 65 miles east of downtown Los Angeles.

The fire was allowed to burn itself out, destroying the equipment-laden plane, which was used as a model in the design of the space shuttle.

It also was seen by amateur astronomers in Phoenix, Ariz., who "said it began as a light green color, then turned red, persisted for several minutes and developed a very visible tail," which dissipated a few minutes later, Ousley said.

The artificial comets Wednesday night and last December were part of a joint American-West German-British study named AMPTE, for Active Magnetospheric Particle Tracer Explorers. In addition to the two comet-creating barium releases, the project involved six other releases of lithium and barium from the West German satellite since last September, which weren't intended to form artificial comets.

The interaction between solar wind and Earth's magnetic field causes Earth's Northern and Southern Lights and can disrupt communications on Earth and electronics aboard spacecraft.



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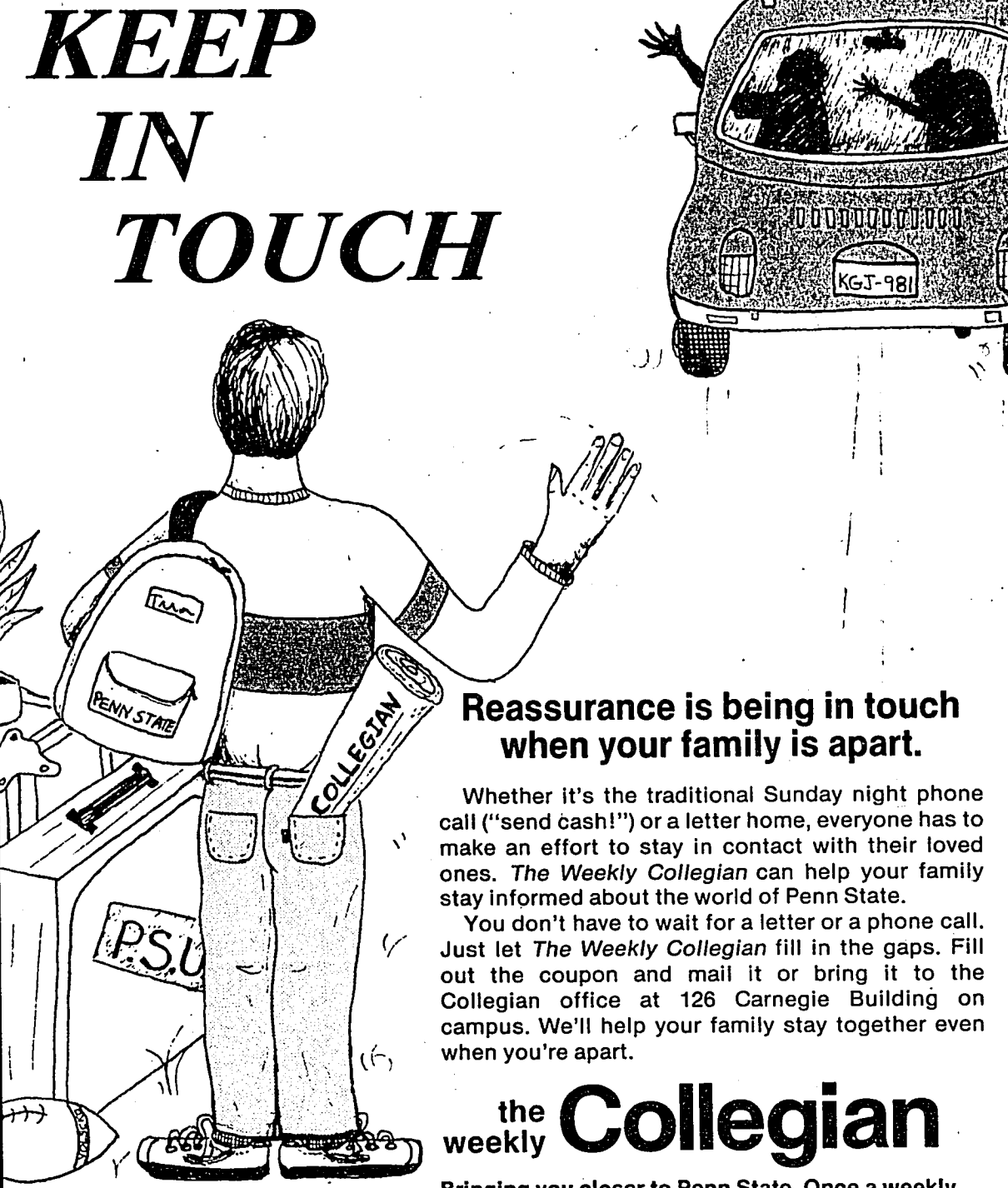
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