

Award-winning tales from the ER

I believe everyone should have a hobby. My mom collected stamps and Depression-era glass. When I was a young boy, I collected coins. Soon after I became an emergency department physician I began to collect something much more entertaining and fun; I collect injuries from the ER. Not just any injuries — the ones I collect are special. You may know them by another name: "The Darwin Awards."

About once a year an e-mail circulates detailing the current year's crop of incredibly creative ways people manage to end their lives through sheer stupidity. There exists an organization that verifies these injuries and separates urban legend from the truth validating each injury. Books have been written and movies made of the same title. The term "Darwin Award" is derived from the theory of natural selection put forth by Charles Darwin in 1859.

Darwin believed in some very simple ideas:

- Individuals vary from one another.
- Variation is inheritable.
- Individuals less suited to the environment are less likely to survive and less likely to reproduce.
- If individuals do something to harm themselves that smarter people would not do, they risk becoming victims of natural selection.

Let's you think me callous, please realize that as a physician, I do everything in my power to help every patient I treat.

But at the end of the day, we can shake our heads and laugh. True Darwin Award recipients must die to be eliminated from the gene pool, but I strive to find cases where the talent of the medical community prevented a patient's demise.

I have found a set of common denominators likely to increase injury in the shallow end of the gene pool:

- Snakes.
- Male gender.
- Alcohol.
- Moving vehicles.
- Firearms or fire.
- A history of incarceration.

Consider a few examples:

Mr. X spent a sunny afternoon with his friends drinking beer and hunting rattlesnakes. Mr. X picked up a rattler, which promptly bit his hand. Angered, he tried to break its neck. It bit him again. He then emptied his revolver at it, the last bullet ricocheting and striking his leg. One friend was convinced that electricity neutralizes snake venom. Using jumper cables

and a pickup truck, they shocked him. Another friend convinced him snake venom is made ineffective by immersion in ice. Eventually abandoning their efforts and him, they called 911, leaving their friend in a bathtub of ice. He arrived in the ER in shock, hypothermic and near death. Rapid work by paramedics and the ER staff saved his life.

From CNN, I collected the story of a Portland man who put a baby rattlesnake in his mouth to show his friend how docile the creature was. The snake bit his tongue. When paramedics arrived, the swollen tongue was blocking his airway. In a rapid course of skilled surgical maneuvers, the trauma team performed a tracheostomy, allowing the patient to breathe. When he recovered, he called CNN to tell the nation of his ordeal.

Or this: a group of friends argued which was the best marksman with a crossbow. Placing an apple on his head, one stood bravely 30 paces away from his friend, trusting his skills. The arrow pierced his eye, traveled through his brain, and exited his skull. Again, talented surgeons and dedicated specialists were able to save the man.

Was Darwin correct? As a doctor with a strange hobby, I know he was. You may prefer to walk along the beach and collect pretty shells, but I'll keep scanning the papers and medical literature for Darwin Awards candidates my fellow physicians managed to drag out of the shallow end of the gene pool and save. ■

—DR. MATTHEW M. ESCHELBACH

Eschelbach is the medical director of the St. Charles Redmond emergency room.

SUBMISSIONS

Do you have a funny health story you'd like to share? Send 500 words or less to pulse@bendbulletin.com. Editors will select one submission for each edition.

