

NEWS OF THE WEIRD

BY CHUCK SHEPHERD

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The modern mother

Style- and environment-conscious Canadian mothers insist on cloth diapers, especially designer labels of flannel, fleece or wool-knit, according to a November report in Toronto's Globe and Mail. Handmade embroidered diapers (perhaps in tie-dye or camouflage) are priced at up to \$80 each (and some babies get to wear them only just after taking care

of business in an ordinary diaper). And, in London, mothers can take babies for workouts, as several gyms recently reacted to warnings about childhood obesity by creating programs to shape up kids as young as 10 months (teaching galloping, "monkey jumps" and forward rolls), and in February, one gym will begin accepting 4-month-olds. ■

Cultural diversity

• In October, Italy's economic minister, noting that a third of all men over 30 still live with their parents and that rental housing markets are depressed, proposed a tax break worth the equivalent of about \$1,400 for each man in his 20s who will finally leave Momma's house. (A week earlier in Sicily, one mother publicly turned her adult son over to the police for staying out too late, and also took away his house keys and cut off his allowance. The son, who immediately complained that the allowance was too small, anyway, is 61 years old.)

• The normal daily tension between India and Pakistan arises in many forms, but one nightly ceremony on the border at Wagah crossing is particularly odd (described by a Los Angeles Times reporter in September as part pomp, part macho posturing, and part Monty Python's Ministry of Silly Walks). Uniformed guards from both countries march toward each other in their inexplicably complicated

headgear, "glower fiercely through their mustaches" and puff themselves up, eyeball to eyeball, in a show of confidence for their respective countrymen. However, they then meekly shake hands and close the border for the night.

• Residents of small fishing villages in northern Newfoundland have for centuries been "mumming" at Christmas-time, in rituals described in an October academic journal article by University of Missouri-Columbia researchers. People disguise themselves, go to neighbors' houses and threaten violence, at which point the neighbor must guess the visitor's identity, and, if all goes well, refuse to be scared. Supposedly, the ritual induces trust by both parties, as the visitors show their good hearts by failing to actually beat anyone up, and the host shows trust by his courage and passivity. Mumming, the researchers conclude, continues today only on a "small scale." ■

Latest religious messages

• "This is a college education that I can use," said sophomore Emily Felts, 19, as she praised the homemaking curriculum of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas (which leads to a Bachelor of Arts in Humanities). Men and women may be equal, the school says, but they have different roles, and for women, that includes "how to set tables, sew buttons and sustain lively dinnertime conversation," or how to use the Internet to track grocery coupons, according to an October dispatch in the Los Angeles Times. Felts said she enjoys the work (except vacuuming), but it "doesn't

matter what I think. It matters what the Bible says."

• In November, Catholic priests in Ireland and Northern Ireland complained about their respective governments' proposals to lower the presumed-impaired blood-alcohol level for drivers from .08 to .05, which they say is unfair. Because of a priest shortage, current priests expect to be driving great distances to conduct Masses this Christmas season, and since they are obliged to drink any leftover sacramental wine from each Mass, they fear inevitably approaching, or exceeding, the blood-alcohol threshold. ■

Questionable judgments

• In October, Patty Cooper, 50, accused her landlord (the Central Vermont Community Land Trust) of failing to "accommodate" her disability under the federal Americans with Disabilities Act when it barred her "service horse" from living in her apartment. Cooper uses a wheelchair because of a brittle-bones disorder and says the miniature horse (100 pounds, 32 inches tall) not only pulls the chair but also cheers her up. A trust spokesman said keeping rats out of the hay bales would be difficult enough, but he doubted Cooper's assurance that the horse could be easily housebroken.

• In November, a California administrative judge sided with state dental authorities and suspended Dr. Mark Anderson's license, following complaints by female

patients that he had massaged their chests to treat a jaw disorder. Anderson's lawyer, citing alleged dental journal articles, had asserted that jaw pain was related not only to pectoral muscles but even calf muscles. (In November, Anderson was also indicted for sexual battery against patients.)

• The head teacher of Sandhurst Junior School in south London apologized in October because a professional photographer had arranged, for his own convenience, an unfortunate group photo of the school's 100-plus students. The photographer, trying to keep from having to re-set his reflector screens, lined up the kids from the lightest-skinned on the left, gradually over to the darkest-skinned on the right. Said the head teacher, "We can see that this was an error of judgment." ■

Least competent criminals

In Monticello, N.Y., Steven King, 40, was indicted in October as a result of a traffic stop, for allegedly doing nearly every single thing wrong: intoxicated, driving in oncoming-traffic lanes, with an open beer container, not wearing a seat belt, driv-

ing an uninsured car, with expired safety inspection sticker, with license plates belonging to another car, and with his 2-year-old daughter-passenger neither in a car seat nor belted in. ■

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