

WellNews: Scared to death

by Scott_LaFee

Last month, police in Charlotte, N.C., charged a would-be bank robber with first-degree murder after he burst into the house of a 79-year-old woman, resulting in her death.

After botching an attempted robbery, 20-year-old Larry Whitfield broke into and hid out in the home of Mary Parnell. Whitfield did not touch Parnell, but the woman died after suffering a heart attack. Prosecutors say Whitfield is guilty of murder because he, in effect, scared Parnell to death.

Scientific American asked Martin A. Samuels, a neurologist at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, if it's actually physically possible to do that.

Samuels says yes, absolutely. What happens, he said, is that the body's natural flight-or-fight response is triggered, resulting in increased heart rate, more blood flow to muscles, dilated pupils and other physiological responses.

The body is flooded with the hormone adrenaline, which in large amounts can be toxic, damaging internal organs. In the case of the heart, adrenaline keeps the heart constantly contracting — it can't relax and begins to beat irregularly until, quite suddenly, it simply fails.

Though not yet proven, this may be what happened to Parnell. But death can result in other situations less scary or life-threatening. One example: The case of a golfer who hit a hole in one, turned to his partner and said, "I can die now," then dropped dead.

NUMBER CRUNCHER

One wonton (a fried Chinese appetizer) contains 55 calories, 27 from fat. That's 5 percent of the recommended total fat intake for a 2,000-calorie daily diet. It also contains 4 grams of total carbohydrates and 2 grams of protein.

STORIES FOR THE WAITING ROOM

Tanzania's prime minister recently banned traditional healers from practicing, an attempt to stop the murder

of albino people in the African country. According to New Scientist magazine, there have been 40 such murders since mid-2007. Some healers believe that consuming potions containing albino body parts brings good luck.

BODY OF KNOWLEDGE

Women feel more pain than men.

OBSERVATION

Genius is nothing but continued attention.

â€™ French Philosopher Claude A. Helvetius

PHOBIA OF THE WEEK

Athazagoraphobia: fear of being forgotten or of forgetting

DOC TALK

Inbreds â€™ Doctor personnel who remain in the same institution for their entire training (medical school, residency, fellowship).

MEDTRONICA

The Breast Site

thebreastsite.com

A comprehensive site covering all aspects of breast health: effective self-examinations, breast-feeding techniques, cancer rates and treatments, augmentation and bras.

EPITAPHS

That's All Folks

â€” Mel Blanc, the voice of Porky Pig, Bugs Bunny and many others (1908-1989)

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