

A Silent Cognitive Crash

Stupid (adj.); said of an intelligent and educated person, who has failed to use the sense God gave a goose, bringing unnecessary grief or trouble.

—my mom

Foolishness is most easily seen in the lapses of people who've earned respect and responsibility. The frontal lobes of even someone as solid as yourself may take a vacation, abandoning their control duties — swept away by a wave of emotion welling up from the reptilian limbic system at the brain's root.

Faye was excited. The day was beautiful. She was with her favorite guy, Randy, who'd given her a certificate for a glider ride. It was something she'd always wanted to do.

The only thing that worried her was getting airsick and embarrassing herself. She'd heard these gliders go around and round in circles, and she'd never been good in the tilt-a-whirl. The caramel apple had been so good on the way down... It was not good on the way back, and her shoes got sticky inside.

The airfield was a little confusing to her. A big, grassy area, people milling about on one side, most of them going back and forth from a shelter; gliders akimbo

on the field, some beautiful, others cute. There was a machine of some kind, she saw, far down at one end of the grass. A car drove from it to a glider at the near end of the grass, and a couple of people were busy around its nose. The car drove off to the side.

Then someone held the glider's wings level, there was a grand pause, a flag was waved, and the glider swooshed swiftly along the grass, raised and then lowered its tail, and rose like a kite in a strong wind high above them, then it leveled, slowed and circled, and drifted away.

God, she wanted to be there. She and Randy walked over to some guys with clipboards and showed them her certificate. Conversation happened. Her name was put on a list. She sat under the edge of the shelter, enjoying the shade and the breeze, and the show.

While she waited, a man began to talk to her. "Hi!" he said, "I'm Don. I'm today's ride pilot."

She introduced herself and Randy, and they chatted. While they talked, she mentioned her worry about airsickness.

"Oh," he said, "don't worry about that! I've got some pills that will take excellent care of that!" He pulled a little metal box from his pocket and handed her two pink tablets. "Take these. They'll take effect in about half an hour, by the time it's our turn. You won't have to worry about airsickness at all. Never happens with these."

"What are they?" she asked.

"Scopolamine," he said. "It's the best medicine to prevent motion sickness. Doctors prescribe it all the time!"

"Are you a doctor?" she asked.

"No, but you don't have to be to buy these pills. I get them on the Internet from Columbia, where the trees grow that make this. It's the natural stuff, not some manufactured pharmaceutical crap. Nobody ever has vomited in *my* ship. I

give these to everyone who's had airsickness. They work great!"

"OK," she said, and took them with a sip of her soda.

It was indeed a pleasant day. Faye felt very mellow after a while. She walked to the glider with less flounce than usual. She did indeed not vomit, nor did she even get sick.

She took a nap that afternoon after they got home, something she rarely did, and had vivid, bizarre dreams. Strangely, she had little memory of the flight, just the amazing acceleration at first, then the sensation of floating above the green earth when they leveled. Randy was very kind to have bought the ride.

Monday she made a mistake at work, sent a spreadsheet *about* a customer *to* the customer. Tuesday, she pressed *reply-all* on an email from an associate who was pissing and moaning about their boss, and then accidentally typed his name.

Wednesday she and the associate were fired. She went home and took a nap. Thursday, she took a longer nap. Friday, she started feeling like she should start looking for another job. But she wasn't sure yet that she had enough energy.

What happened to Faye?

Someone sent me an excerpt from an old discussion-group posting that said, "...the most effective prescription med for airsickness that I have found is... scopolamine in tablet form. Same drug as in the very expensive anti-nausea patches. Much cheaper in tablet form and the dose is easier to regulate. Extremely effective and fewer side effects than the patch [and] is sold over-the-counter in Europe. ...30 milligrams... will completely prevent motion sickness in a 180lb male for 6 hours. Confirmed by personal experience. Anyhow, you can buy [it] through the internet..."

"I cannot recommend this stuff enough, especially if you give a lot of rides and find that no matter how gently you fly, passengers frequently experience nausea. Give 'em a [tablet] 30 minutes before flight and you can subject your pax to outside snap rolls after a lunch of greasy pork ribs and they won't yack. Fly safe."

If you're interested, simply google up *scopolamine 'adverse effects'* and scan



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through the hits. Then search for *scopolamine* 'zombie' and see what you get.

Before safer drugs were available, scopolamine was used for many purposes, especially sleep and pain relief, for stomach cramps and to dry up drippy noses. It was known to produce drowsiness, confusion, disorientation, incoordination, and amnesia for events experienced during intoxication. Men may become unable to urinate, hearts may race, and hallucinations or nightmares occur.

It has been used to impair brain function in research on dementia, and to relieve the pain of eye inflammation (though it can precipitate glaucoma attacks).

There are Internet news articles about criminals in Columbia using scopolamine powder to make victims compliant and cooperative with theft, robbery, or lasciviousness, sometimes for days (this stuff has a very long half-life). This is credible pharmacologically, especially if given to people who are already consuming alcohol, a bad drug combination.

Why do I say that Don the ride pilot was being stupid? Because he assumed that everything he knew (very little) was enough. This is a very common mistake. We call this "presumptuous" when we want to insult a person elegantly. Here's the deal:

First, the response of individuals to a drug, especially one with such broad actions as scopolamine, is highly variable, and is not predictable. One person will

hardly notice any bad effect while another is disabled by side effects.

Second, people use, in their lives, a variety of mind-altering over-the-counter and prescription drugs, especially alcohol and antihistamines (discussed last month), antidepressants, and bladder-control pills.

Drugs used together "cooperate" in sometimes interesting ways. Do you know what else the passenger who takes your scopolamine pill is taking? I didn't think so.

Third, sometimes people have hypersensitivity or allergy to a drug. What about your passenger? Did you think to ask? Probably not – perhaps because asking such questions raises the 'caution' flag in people's minds, and then become less cooperative about taking some unknown substance from the smiling man in the floppy hat at the rural airport.

Fourth, scopolamine has long persistence. I know of a man who took his 16-year-old daughter on a 3-day business trip years ago in his small airplane. She worried about airsickness; he had a transdermal scopolamine patch, and so helped her put it behind her ear before they left. About 3 hours later, after a couple of short legs, he noticed that she seemed less perky than usual.

He immediately peeled the patch off, but through the rest of what was intended to be a father-daughter treat, she spent every quiet moment napping – even slept through the last leg, through a turbu-

lent storm. Years later she has almost no memory of that trip.

Fifth, these side effects and drug interactions are the reason scopolamine is not over-the-counter in the U.S. Even if it's OTC in another country, it is not legal for an untrained bozo, even an educated and intelligent one, to administer to someone. If an incident with damage occurs, who can come after him legally? The state and the unwitting "patient."

In this situation, Faye might have recourse against Don the pilot for having been fired from her job (and his club or employer, if they knew about and failed to disapprove of his medical practice).

However, the threat of legal trouble is far less important than learning not to play with fire around our friends. And drugs, my dear reader, *are* fire. It is my job, not only to tell the person for whom I'm writing the prescription its intended favorable effects, but also to describe the predictable adverse effects.

(With every drug there are three questions: *first*, is it *tolerable*? *second*, is it *effective*? and *third*, considering the expense and annoyance, is it *worth taking*?)


Not every crash involves bent tubes and torn fabric, broken composite, or broken bones. Some crashes, like Faye's, occur quietly, invisibly to the world; sometimes, without apparent cause. She probably never connected her mistakes to the pills she took during the weekend.

Please don't give your riders (or friends or students) drugs. ✈

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