

## The Actuary

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# Get real with equations

**T**HERE IS A DISTURBING NEW FORCE AT WORK IN OUR society. More insidious than heroin or those pirate *Finding Nemo* DVDs which directly fund global terrorism, it threatens to strike at everything we hold dear.

Rogue equations are on the loose.

They began innocently a couple of years ago. Quirky Christmas articles in the *Sun* on the area of wrapping paper required for a Toblerone and suchlike, but they were one-offs written by desperate professors to feed their starving children and make their Christmas a little less miserable.

But now the malaise seems to be spreading. Recent issues of *Cosmopolitan*, with formulae for the perfect relationship the perfect boyfriend, and the perfect career, have contained more maths than *The Actuary*. That can't be right. And I have a sneaking suspicion that very little of it is properly peer-reviewed. Or even makes sense.

For instance, the July issue of *Company* contained a test to measure your boyfriend's vaginal quotient or 'VQ'. For the mystified, this is a measure of one's feminine understanding. At first I was thrilled to discover that I had a high enough VQ without compromising my PQ. But then I began to question the validity of this measure – surely in calculating a quotient one figure has to be divided by another, but the article gave no indication as to what these may be. What about the scale of the measure? I needed more.

Digging a little deeper I turned up a seedy little underworld of backstreet academics trading equations for cash. In the old days, if you were a biscuit company wanting to get your name in the tabloids you had to go to the trouble of commissioning a bogus survey on the nation's dunking habits. But now you can slip a mathematician a few bob and he'll scribble down some algebra to find the perfect dunking angle before zipping off in his Lamborghini with a supermodel in the passenger seat. Pow! – instant headline. Of course, the maths doesn't actually have to make sense. Who's going to notice?

Dr Cliff Arnall, a health psychologist at Cardiff University, could lay a claim to being the Heidi Fleiss of this secret world. Already this year he has helped firms to find the formulae for the happiest day of the year and the best day to make a resolution. His latest offering is the formula for the perfect long weekend:

$$(C \times R \times ZZ) / ((Tt + D) \times St) + (P \times Pr) > 400$$

Where:

Tt = travel time

D = delays

C = time spent on cultural activities

R = time spent relaxing

ZZ = time spent sleeping

St = time spent in a state of stress

P = time spent packing

Pr = time spent in preparation

This is not good maths. For starters, what time units are



used? Presumably they are needed to make sense of the threshold of 400 required for a fun time. It is also nonsense dimensionally, with mixed dimensions of T and T<sup>2</sup> on the left-hand side. Finally, it implies that an infinitely good time can be had by staying at home and cutting your travel time to zero. Dr Arnall clearly enjoys packing though – perhaps he is a proper mathematician after all.

Trivialising the subject in this way cannot be helpful in the long run. It patronises the public and can give the impression that public funds are being wasted by universities in such 'research'. Perhaps it is just a bit of fun but in with falling numbers of students going on to study maths at higher levels we need real champions of the subject. People who can sell the subject as a valued skill which can lead to careers that are both personally lucrative and of benefit to our economy. There is much talk of actuarial involvement in raising the level of financial awareness among the public, and as the high priests of maths we are best placed to showcase the subject as the key to a successful and rewarding career.

In the meantime, I am pleased to announce the founding of the Campaign for Real Equations. CAMRE will be a haven for like-minded individuals to grow beards, wear sandals, and extol the virtues of old-fashioned equations, identities, and functions. There will also be an annual CAMRE guide, listing places where one can be assured of equations of utmost quality, which will definitely feature *The Actuary*. And possibly *Cosmopolitan*, if it finally manages to come up with a proper formula for the perfect girl's night in.

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