

Déjà vu

The insurers never did admit to funding it, though it's hard to imagine it being worthwhile for anyone else. Incredible, really, that the hypothesis attracted any money at all: the body as a tiny model of the universe, with all the attendant physics played out in miniature. The big question was whether there was a biological equivalent to the speed of light, and if so, what was it? This must have been what intrigued the physicists; presumably the biology grads who joined were simply the ones who didn't want to inject tumours into rats.

Progress was slow. Initial interest in the idea was overwhelmed by the announcement that researchers in Delhi had identified an obscure gene that, when turned on, produced what amounted to a body's own chemotherapy response. That lab eventually had to stop accepting funding. They couldn't spend the money fast enough. A few years later, cancer as a cause of death had virtually disappeared.

Insurance companies hired a whole year's worth of new actuarial science grads to scrub the old mortality tables of cancer deaths. The life insurers were thrilled. The annuity providers quietly panicked. Someone leaked the adjusted tables to The New York Times, which ran a front page article that began "Mortality rates down, insurer profits up". This was only half true, at best; but the people had conquered cancer - just like they said they would, they told each other proudly - and they were ready to take on corporate greed next.

Canada was the first government to pass major revisions to its insurance act. Insurers were required to reprice their coverage using the new mortality tables. Life insurance premiums dropped 20% on average. Annuity quotes were up almost a third. On its own, this might have been manageable. But the new act went on to say that premium reductions had to be retroactive, while higher premiums could only be applied to new policies, phased in over five years. In both cases reserves were to be calculated on the new basis. Within a quarter several of the smaller annuity providers had failed to meet their capital requirements and were folded into the larger carriers without objection.

All the while the folks studying the body-as-universe theory (no one spent much time on a name) tried to find something in the body that was analogous to light. Blood was quickly ruled out. Someone suggested pain and the whole cohort of researchers spent two years searching for evidence that people felt pain nanoseconds before an injury actually happened. A few of the less official labs were caught testing this protocol on human patients. There was the obligatory shock when it was first reported, but since they had by that point disproved the idea, outrage waned quickly.

Popular lore is that one of the researchers, recounting a dream they'd had the night before, finished their story, "It was total déjà vu". The physicist listening ran into the lab shouting about identifying the neural pathways that cause déjà vu: the sensation that something has already happened. The first information to arrive about any event. The body's version of light. In the paper publishing their findings, they called it "DV rays".

While fascinating, this didn't solicit nearly as much philanthropy as curing cancer had ten years earlier. In fact, people seemed to think it didn't really matter anymore; so much formerly inevitable death had been eliminated. That the research didn't stall right then is as much proof as anything that someone was paying very close attention.

No one suspected it was the insurance industry. Profit margins had been undercut so significantly as a result of the previous decade's legislative changes, surely they had nothing left to contribute. But even the promise of money is often enough. Once the insurers had explained how they wanted to use DV rays they were able to retain a core group of researchers willing to work for pure equity. The distributed labs were reorganized under a single principal investigator in New Mexico, though this went largely unnoticed.

In later depositions, an insurance executive explained it like making sunprints: shine someone's DV rays onto the right material and you'd end up with the image of the events that created those DV rays. Simple, in concept. And yet the New Mexican PI and her lab spent years just attempting to capture DV rays. They weren't told at the time, but all new policyholders, when they agreed to provide their medical history and submit to an insurer-arranged physical exam, were first seen by one of the researchers running whatever protocol they were testing. The breakthrough in this part of the research happened with an individual recorded as "T. Alex Baker". The method for capturing DV rays was referred to as "tabbing" in their honor.

Once they knew how to tab, the lab was still faced with the problem of interpreting DV rays. There never has been a satisfactory explanation as to how this phase of the project succeeded as quickly as it did. That the prosecutors didn't pursue it implies to some that this technology existed already, perhaps it was even owned by the federal government. However they obtained it, the lab began projecting their tabbed DV rays onto reams of electrified fabric: yards of cloth woven from thread containing miniscule electrodes, successor to the electrode caps from the early 2000s.

The insurance companies were lucky: they only needed to determine the duration of a DV print. As soon as the first deaths occurred amongst tabbed policyholders, a handful of actuarial analysts were reassigned from the pricing departments. An early record from this project, identified as member ID no. 38972, had a DV print that ended quite abruptly at age 45. Data listed the cause of death as a traumatic brain injury resulting from a falling coconut. An analyst had highlighted the claimant's occupation: accountant. Within a year the insurers had roughly calibrated the length of a DV print with age at death. Eventually, because the amount of information contained within DV rays was so vast, they were able to predict an individual's time of death within a minute. Not that they ever used that level of precision; knowing the year was more than sufficient.

Armed with each prospective policyholder's tabbed DV rays and their conversion model, the insurers introduced "personalized pricing". Their marketing departments spun it as the most intimate level of service ever contemplated in the industry. It should have been suspicious: all the insurers adopting this approach simultaneously, without direction from any government. But people were optimistic about all the ways they wouldn't die anymore and perhaps they hoped that predatory capitalism, like cancer, was similarly extinct.

Personalized pricing became the norm, and the researchers called in their equity promises. What had seemed like a good (and probably the only) solution at the time became intolerably costly, just as the industry was starting to recapture the profit margins it had lost since insurance reform. One of the CFOs suggested mining the DV prints for other events - injury or illness, career changes, even generic location data - and selling this information to anyone willing to pay for it. The insurers redirected all their analysts, idle now without the uncertainty of future payouts to value, to parse through each unabridged record of a human life. While they were otherwise occupied, it became even more obvious that the actuaries who had once been synonymous with the industry itself were, suddenly, unnecessary.

At the next round of board meetings the CFOs presented prospective financials restoring nearly five basis points to their still-devastated profit margins, just by eliminating this one department. (That it was arguably the only operational department was not mentioned.) By fiscal year end, most of those CFOs had been promoted and were issuing sweeping announcements about a future “without risk”. Despite the considerable severance packages paid to the actuarial staff, stock prices rose for the first time in two decades. In a small, interior office a single actuary remained at each insurer. Someone still had to attest to reserve adequacy, even if they knew they'd never need it.

The industry might have pulled it off if not for all those furloughed actuaries. Regulators started investigating the largest insurance companies within six months, though it was soon obvious that the entire industry had been colluding for 25 years. Newspapers reran their old columns alongside the new allegations. Stock exchanges halted trading across the entire financial services sector. Federal governments everywhere assumed control of the insurers. One of the still-unemployed actuaries noted a significant drop in mortality that year. He attributed it to people being abundantly cautious, uncertain that their life insurance policies would actually pay out in the event of their death. The observation got a lot of traction on a reinvigorated Actuarial Outpost, but none of the mainstream media picked it up.

Buried in a deposition recording and never shown in court was the final interview with a former chief actuary. The interviewer asks why she tipped off the regulator, and at first it seems like she hasn't heard. The interviewer is getting up from the table when she finally replies: “Actuaries *are* the insurance industry. Accountants fired all of us - accountants! Can you imagine?”