

THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

Family Physician Gazes Upward

During summers as grade school students in Woodland Hills, Calif., Dr. Steven Reeder and his brothers would set up cots in their backyard and sleep beneath the stars, gazing at the cosmos.

"We'd fall asleep gazing upward, using binoculars and just the naked eye," recalls Dr. Reeder, who currently practices family medicine in Mesa, Ariz.

Despite his longtime fascination with the night sky—including long-standing subscriptions to the magazines "Sky and Telescope" and "Astronomy"—he didn't seriously start the hobby until 1991, when he volunteered to teach content required for an astronomy merit badge to a local Boy Scout troop.

"One year, we took the scouts to Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff [Ariz.], the site where Pluto was discovered," he said. "We had a great time with that old telescope."

Before long, he bought his first gadget for stargazing: a 4-inch reflector telescope. "You couldn't see much with it, but I could see the rings around Saturn," said Dr. Reeder, who is a former Boy Scout but never earned the astronomy merit badge.

In 1999, he acquired an 8-inch telescope, which is now the smallest in his collection. "It was computer driven, so it was much easier to find things and look at stars that had exploded, as well as distant and close galaxies, and nebulae," he said.

But he was determined to "see" even better, so in the summer of 2007, Dr. Reeder designed and built an observatory

in his backyard. It "resembles a playhouse, which is a requirement of my psychologist wife, but works nicely to keep the weather out and the equipment safe," he said. The equipment includes a 14-inch computer-driven Celestron telescope positioned on a German equatorial mount.

The device "is like a built-in planetarium, so if you fix on a couple of stars, the computer then sets up like an observatory. You can tell it to focus on Orion or wherever, and it will go right there," he said.

One night, he hosted a group of 50 Boy Scouts, which was "a little hectic," he said. "They were more interested in the telescope's laser pointer than in the celestial sights."

These days, he spends about 1 night a week in the observatory gazing at the sky, drawn by what he described as "the grandeur of it all."

Stargazing "provides a feeling of how much God has created out there," he said. "It's a sense of the divine, something much greater than us. It is a remarkable thing."



Family physician and astronomy buff, Dr. Steven Reeder, spends about 1 night a week in his backyard observatory.



Dr. Reeder photographed the Sombrero galaxy using his telescopic equipment.

PHOTOS COURTESY DR. STEVEN REEDER

when Mars and the Earth reached the closest points in their respective orbits. "That was a wonderful sight," he said.

Dr. Reeder's youngest son, who is now 21 years old, shares his interest in all things astronomy, but his wife sometimes calls herself an "astronomy widow," he said. "She's good natured about it. She says that unless she sees somebody waving back at her, she's not really interested." ■

By Doug Brunk, San Diego Bureau

E-MAIL US YOUR STORIES

The purpose of The Rest of Your Life is to celebrate the interests and passions of physicians outside of medicine. If you have an idea for this column or would like to tell your story, send an e-mail to d.brunk@elsevier.com.

INDICATIONS

Small-Scale Harmony

John Donne said "no man is an island," but it seems that bacteria, and those who study bacteria, have a different opinion. "I view humans as 'continents' of microscopic ecological zones with the kind of diversity comparable to deep oceans or tropical jungles," said Noah Fierer of the University of Colorado at Boulder. He and his associates used a new DNA sampling technique known as "metagenomics" to show that standard culturing of human skin bacteria dramatically underestimates the full extent of microbial diversity. They found that a typical hand had about 150 different species of bacteria living on it, and they identified more than 4,700 species among the total of 102 hands in the study. It's good to know that bacteria, at least, have figured out how to get along with each other.

Color Me Informed

Knowledge is power, which means that consumer advocates must fight a never-ending battle to disgust people by letting them know what they're actually eating. In early January, the FDA decided in response to a petition

from the Center for Science in the Public Interest that food and cosmetics manufacturers that use carmine and cochineal extract—colorings extracted from the dried bodies of cochineal bugs and used in reddish-colored fruit drinks, ice creams, yogurts, and candies—must declare on the labels that those products contain the dried bodies of bugs. This will "help people who suffered allergic reactions determine if the colors were the culprits," the center said in a statement. But which is worse: dead bugs or artificial colors?

'It's Evil! Don't Touch It'

It's true that knowledge is power, but it may be that a little knowledge about food allergies can be a dangerous thing. Dr. Nicholas A. Christakis has suggested that measures to control nut allergies "represent a gross overreaction to the magnitude of the threat," and "are making things worse" (BMJ 2008;337:a2880). One overreaction he mentioned, which took place at the elementary school that his children attend, involved a school bus full of children and a lone peanut that was discovered on the

floor. "The bus was evacuated and cleaned ... even though it was full of 10-year-olds, who, unlike 2-year-olds, could actually be told not to eat food off the floor," Dr. Christakis wrote.

'Fat for Fuel'

Biodiesel often is touted as an environmentally friendly fuel of the future, but what's the best source? French fry grease? Algae? How about beef tallow? For Dr. Craig Alan Bittner, the answer to that question is just a liposuction procedure away, according to Forbes.com. It appears that Dr. Bittner used the fat he removed from his patients to make biodiesel for his and his girlfriend's SUVs.

"The vast majority of my patients request that I use their fat for fuel—and I have more fat than I can use," he reportedly wrote on his now-defunct Web site, lipodiesel.com. Unfortunately for him, it turns out that using medical waste as fuel is illegal in the state California. So, Dr. Bittner is under investigation by the state's public health department, according to Forbes, which also noted that Dr. Bittner had closed his practice, Beverly Hills Liposculpture, in November and moved to South America. Coincidentally, Citgo stations, which get their fuel from Venezuela, are now selling regular, premium, and Soylent Green.

—Richard Franki

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