

Stupid Laws And Why They Exist

Contributed by Steve Gillman
Friday, 13 March 2009

A look at a few of the usual stupid laws that make us laugh, and others that require an explanation.

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This isn't about the usual stupid laws. Oh, it's true that it is illegal to catch fish with your bare hands in Kansas, and that Wyoming has a law forbidding you from wearing a hat that obstructs a person's view in a theater. In South Carolina you need a permit to be a fortune teller, and in Kansas City, Missouri, children can't legally buy toy cap guns, but they can buy real shot guns.

{bot_wrgoogle}This article, however, is about laws that are not considered stupid by most people. This is about one particular class of laws and regulations - those that are supposedly for public safety, but are really intended to benefit some particular group. It sounds good to make laws that make people safe, doesn't it? More often, though, that is just an excuse for making money for some industry, or for bureaucrats who like to exercise control for its own sake.

The idea for the article came from the eye infection I have at the moment. It's a minor problem, and would be easily cured with antibiotic eye drops. I have used them before. No side effects, no problems. I would go buy some right now if I could. Unfortunately, stupid laws prevent buying such eye drops without a prescription from a doctor.

But those laws are to keep us safe, some of you will say. Really? It sounds reasonable, but let's look at the matter more closely. Here I am with an eye infection that could be easily cured with a \$5 medicine. The laws, however, have made it so I have to make a doctors appointment and get a prescription. Now it is not only 16 times as expensive, but I don't have time. We are leaving for South America in a few days.

The result? I don't treat it. Is that safer? Before you say this is a unique case, think about how many people hesitate to spend a day off work and \$80 to see a doctor to get that \$5 medicine. There are millions here without insurance. So here is a law that is supposed to make us safer, but results in leaving an infection untreated (or at least results in making the treatment 16 times as expensive).

My solution? Wednesday, when I am out of the "land of the free" and in Ecuador, I will be free to buy the drops from a pharmacist. Oh, they have their stupid laws there too (every country does), but fortunately not so many of these kinds of regulations. By the way, to my knowledge, there is not a huge problem with people over-dosing on eye drops there.

That brings me to the point about safety. Things have their risks, and pharmacists can explain them to us, right? Why do we have laws that require doctors to be involved? Follow the money. Who benefits from this system? It certainly keeps doctors busy.

Safety? How many people do you really think would die from antibiotic eye drops? How many would damage their eyes. Some, undoubtedly. As I said, things have their risks - but that includes discouraging treatment by making it expensive and time-consuming. Oh, and by the way, The National Academy of Sciences Institute of Medicine recently issued a report showing that avoidable medical mistakes cause more deaths in the United States each year than car accidents or AIDs or breast cancer. In fact, they are the 8th leading cause of death. So much for relying on the professionals to keep us safe.

What is the real reason behind many stupid laws and regulations that are supposedly in "the public interest." They are primarily intended to benefit a certain group or industry. Do we really think, for example, that there would be a public health disaster if hair stylists weren't licensed? Or is it more likely that it is just a way to limit access to the field and keep profits up?

By the way, we may laugh at the laws requiring licensing of fortune tellers, but I can assure you that before we were so brainwashed, people would have laughed at the idea of laws requiring licensing of hair stylists. I know a house cleaner who thinks there should be a law licensing all house cleaners. Why? "Public good" or "safety" will be the excuse. The real point is that he is tired of the cheap cleaners undercutting his price. Licensing would limit access so the "professional" cleaners could keep rates higher.

Now, why do we have a law to stop those crazy unprofessional hair cutters from causing perhaps two hair styling fatalities annually, while we allow sugar to be sold freely? As one of the primary contributors to diabetes, sugar probably causes tens of thousands of deaths. But then there is nobody with a financial interest in outlawing sugar (or they don't have the lobbying power yet). On the other hand, plenty of industries make money from laws that limit access and keep prices up, and they are good at lobbying for laws that "make us safe."

We can drink, smoke, sit on the couch for hours, marry whoever we want and do many other things that are demonstrably more dangerous than most of the things these laws "protect" us from. Why not let people be informed of the risks and make up their own minds? Because it's bad for business. That's why we have stupid laws that are supposed to be good for us, but are really meant as a way to boost profits and power for some special interest group or industry.

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