

the big research questions in favor of manageable topics that fit with prevailing fashions,” Freeman and Reenen say.

The squeeze has struck hardest at scientists just starting their careers. Postdoctoral researchers labor indefinitely in the labs of senior scientists who continue to win follow-up grants while new grantees are turned down. The average age of new grantees rose from 35.2 in 1970 to 42.9 in 2005, the last year for which numbers are available. Twenty-two percent of grants went to scientists 35 and younger in 1980, but in 2005 only three percent did.

In a choice between equally competent young and older researchers, the economists

argue, the government should tilt toward youth. Youthful applicants will have more years to use the new knowledge and it will have a higher payoff.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Just Another Prescription

THE SOURCE: “Ten Years of ‘Death with Dignity’” by Courtney S. Campbell, in *The New Atlantis*, Fall 2008.

UNLESS YOU LIVE IN THE Pacific Northwest, you may not know that the voters in the state of Washington passed a “death with dignity” initiative on November 4 by a 16-percentage-point margin. In 1997, a ferocious battle

preceded the narrow approval of an Oregon law allowing doctors to write lethal prescriptions for dying patients. In 2006, the law survived a Supreme Court challenge brought by two attorneys general. Now, in contrast to the earlier drama, the extension of the so-called right to die to a second state in November was almost ho-hum news.

Part of the reason is that in 10 years of experience with Oregon’s law, only 541 patients in a state of 3.7 million acquired prescriptions for lethal drugs. Of those, only 341 used them. None of the fears surrounding the new law have proved justified. No public outcry has arisen over pressuring dad to die so junior can sell the business. No flood of

EXCERPT

Everyman’s Qibla

The black granite Kaaba, the cubical structure that stands as the holiest center of Islam, features at its eastern vertex a small black stone about the size of a grapefruit, the al-hajar al-aswad, which may or may not have fallen to earth in the time of Adam and Eve. Supported in a silver frame, this obsidian-like cipher structures space for some billion Muslims, standing as it does at the culminating point known as the qibla—the direction to which devout followers of Muhammad address their five daily obeisances. Tradition has it that the rock was once snowy white, and has darkened over time through exposure to human sin.

A snowy-white stone that gives shape to the universe: As it happens, we all carry within our skulls the vestige of such a thing, a kind of existentially reversed qibla (this one

perspectival, the other metaphysical) that gives us our sense of being at the center of things, the sense that we are upright at the origin point of a three-dimensional space. The “otolithic organs,” as they are known, are a pair of sensors, the utricle and the saccule, nestled in the labyrinthine architecture of the inner ear. . . . The saccule is roughly vertical in our heads, and the utricle more or less horizontal. Together they orient us in the world, since they work as tiny inertial references: Raise your head suddenly (or get a jerky elevator), and the pebbles of the saccule get momentarily left behind as your skull starts upward; this bends down the hairs against which those pebbles lay, and the sensitive hairs function like switches, sending signals to your brain that you register as a feeling of ascent. The utricle does the same work for motion from side to side, and between them these tiny organs generate the neurological data that give us our normal sense of being in the world.

—D. GRAHAM BURNETT, a historian of science at Princeton, author of four books, and an editor of *Cabinet* (Fall 2008)

lawsuits has been filed over the legislation.

What has happened, writes Courtney S. Campbell, a religion and philosophy professor at Oregon State University, is that doctors have almost certainly changed the way they practice medicine. One of the law's major selling points was that it would lead to the alleviation of unbearable pain among the dying. The public response to the issue caused doctors, hospitals, and hospices to pay more attention to pain. Laws and licensure requirements were altered so that doctors no longer faced investi-

A decade-old Washington state law allowing doctors to write lethal prescriptions for dying patients has led to improved care at the end of life.

gation if they boosted dosages of medication to potentially dangerous levels for terminally ill people. Today, the issue of pain has become secondary. More than 80 percent of the patients request-

ing lethal drugs cite a "loss of autonomy" as justification. Pain is sixth on the list.

The expressed purpose of the Oregon law, like that of the Washington initiative, is to allow residents to choose death with dignity. Drugs are not a precondition for such a death, Campbell says, nor does the "possession of a right [entail] its subsequent use."

It may be, writes Campbell, who considers the law a "moral mistake," that the mere possibility of legalizing physician-assisted death serves as sufficient impetus to find alternatives for improving care at the end of life.

ARTS & LETTERS

Gray Listeners

THE SOURCE: "The Ageless Audience" by Diane Haithman, in *Latimes.com*, Oct. 5, 2008.

AUDIENCES FOR CLASSICAL music aren't getting gray, observes Diane Haithman, a writer

for *The Los Angeles Times*. They always *were* gray.

Actually, they're somewhat older than they used to be, but not by as much as first appears. The median age of the typical classical music patron in 2002 was 49, compared

with 40 in 1982. But the median age of the general population increased at the same time, from 40 to 45. So the run-of-the-mill concertgoer grew nine years older between 1982 and 2002—but only four years older than the median American.

The same sort of arithmetic works for patrons of the theater, ballet, and jazz. It is too early to write the obituary for live performing arts, Haithman says.

EXCERPT

The Man Who Knew Too Much

One of the cruel ironies of any literary endeavor is that the filmmaker—or the playwright, or poet, or novelist—can never truly experience the work the way the audience

does. I, who had worked for six years on this movie [Field of Dreams], will never know what it's like to see it. To enter the theater without knowing what will unfold and give myself over to the story. I knew too much, and if I had the ability, I would invent a machine that would selectively wipe our memory, so we too could enjoy our creations without pre-knowledge of their secrets.

—PHIL ALDEN ROBINSON, writer/director of *Field of Dreams*, in *The Hopkins Review* (Fall 2008)