Prediction of Death

I have told you how I collect website addresses with the same manic compulsion as I once collected postage stamps as a schoolboy. Every time I see a website address mentioned in the print media, I rush off and enter it in my file, *Dotcom*. As the entries listed under *Sundries* just kept growing and growing, I decided that I needed to break it down into some new headings. I chose: *Law*, *Medicine*, (divided between *Coventional* and *Alternative*), *Old Age*, *Conjuring Tricks*, *Reference*, and *Strange Facts* and started to re-distribute my addresses. Now, I have admitted that I collect website addresses, but I have never claimed to have accessed every one in my collection. One entry, to be re-distributed from *sundries*, puzzled me. This was www.thespark.com/deathtest, against which I had noted the brief description, *Prediction of Death*.

From the description, this could belong either to *medicine* or *old age* or maybe, just maybe, *reference*, and I decided that I should look to see what it contained. The first page was suprisingly plain, with no advertisements and no clue as to authorship, but just a pair of skull-and-crossbone flags fluttering at the mast-head. Then followed five pages of questions, covering biological details, dangerous activities and the like. This seemed a serious questionnaire, posing the sort of questions which a Life Assurance company might ask, but some of them struck me as being on the jokey side. For instance, I could not see the point of the question under the biological details category which asked whether I had hairy nipples; and the random question, which asked whether I regularly lit firecrackers in my mouth before spitting them out at the last second, seemed flippant.

I answered all the questions seriously, and the website came back with a predicted date of death, which was not too shocking, being only a few years earlier than that shown by the latest actuarial calculations I had read. Plausible, I

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thought, since I smoke and drink and do not follow a particularly healthy lifestyle.

Then I made a new attempt, this time for my mother-in-law, who is now 93 and living quietly in an old folks' home. My daughter thought that this attempt was in bad taste and morbid, but my justification was that I needed some notice in order to put a damp cloth to my black tie and add subject dividers to her financial files before passing them to her solicitor. I had to guess at some of the answers. I had to estimate the height and weight for someone who is very small and very thin and altogether bird-like. No, she does not chew bubblegum. No, she does not ride a bicycle in heavy traffic or go bungee-jumping. I had to guess at the number of her sexual partners, but I could confirm that she does not suffer from HIV or Aids. Eventually, I clicked on the *Predict Date of Death* icon, and it came back with a predicted date five days later than the present date. (I only use the net on Sunday mornings when telephone rates are low, and its prediction was for the coming Friday). I warned my son to make sure that his diary was cleared for the funeral, but my mother-in-law did not pass away that Friday.

I have come to trust computer software, and I was puzzled by this lapse. I tried again on the following Sunday, and this time its prediction was for the coming Friday.

I triple-checked on the following Sunday, and death was still predicted for five days on. I began to have suspicions. Either the software consisted a very clever algorithm, deducting days from the life span for every cigarette smoked and for every car journey taken without wearing a seat belt, or it was no more than a random number generator. If the latter, it might use some simple rules, like "If the date of birth is in the 1930s, choose a random date in the 2020s for the predicted date of death. If the date of birth is in the 1900's, add five days to the present date". (I am sure that my son could turn these rules into C++ format in seconds).

It set me wondering about the accuracy of the net. I have never been entirely sure whether I should believe the updated calculations on *Bill Gates' Personal Wealth Clock* or of the calculation of *The Date When the World's Population Will Reach 8bn*, but, if the *Prediction of Death* calculation is flawed, I start to wonder about the accuracy of the framework of the self-help calculations of mortgage repayments and the like.

I suppose that I can still trust my webcam sites, such as the view from the *Texas Book Depository in Dallas*, and the dolphins swimming off Eilat Reef, and the semi-nude photographs on Jennie's webcam site. Text ought to be safe. I should still be able to believe everything I read on the sites of the Rev. Ian Paisley and the Dalai Lama and the Chechnyan Resistance and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission; but anything involving numbers looks risky. From now on, I will be unable to trust the sites that show railway timetables, unit trust prices and NFL league tables.

If I had wanted an accurate predicted date of death, Tarot cards, I feel, would have been more reliable. ■

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