

Experts shmexperts

By Robert Lipsyte

Though it's only been a few months since we learned from experts that being overweight is OK, I've already lost 12 pounds. The day the report was announced I gave up hamburgers, cookies, bread and beer. Those are my favorite food groups, so portion control on everything else has been easy.

I had already given up wine. Actually, that was some years ago, when we learned from experts that red wine was good for your heart. I was a serious devotee of Beaujolais back then. I knew how to let it breathe, then sniff it and roll it around on my tongue. But I gave away my best bottles as gifts and never replaced them.

Please don't think of me as a contrarian because I don't jump on the bandwagon when experts come down from their government or academic mountains with a fresh set of commandments that contradicts the last set of commandments. Don't assume I'm complaining about the effort involved in absorbing another wave of expertise. Actually, my only real concern is that I'll end up ignoring all expertise, that I'll become so cynical I won't believe in anything.

It's easy to dismiss everything, assume the experts are either honestly wrong or dishonestly lying, paid off by special interests. I don't assume either. I think we have to pick and choose what we believe because most experts — who are probably right half the time — are acting out of self interest.

How to make waves

If most of the expert wisdom is already out there, what's left for the current crop of experts? The only chance for the new guys — the "nexperts" — is to make room for themselves by knocking some old expert wisdom off the shelf.

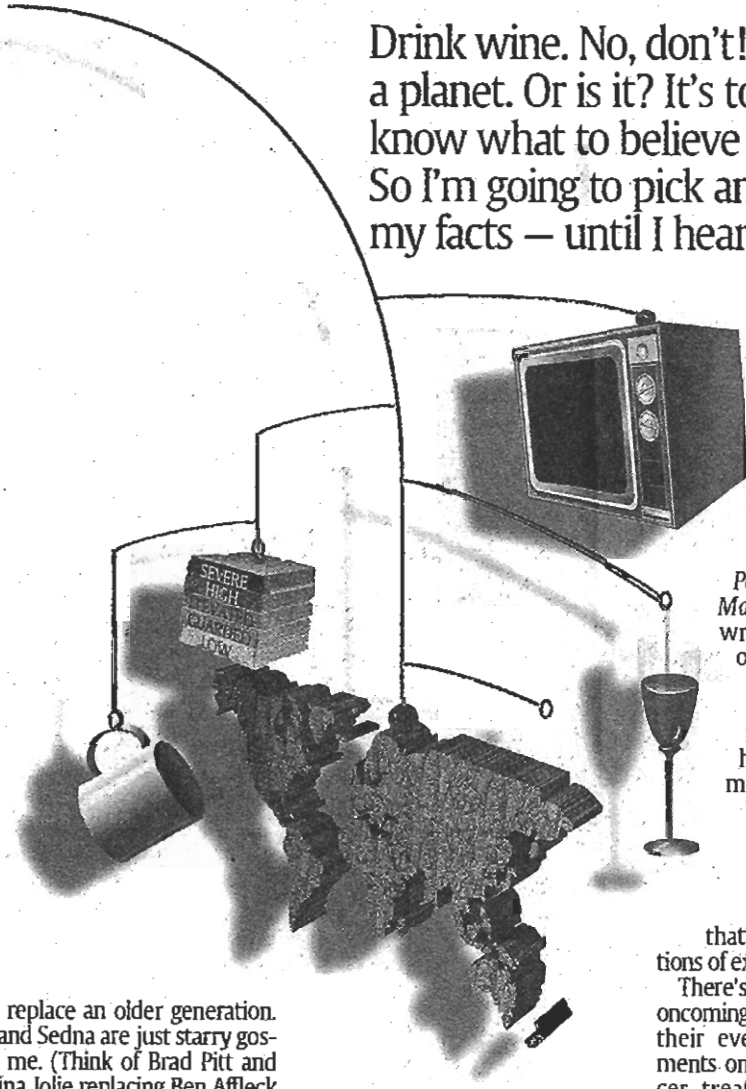
Sometimes, the latest expert wisdom is interesting but doesn't have much to do with our everyday lives. For example, the recent information that Pluto might not be a real planet after all. All my life I've struggled to remember the planets in our solar system and their order from the sun. And now we hear that Pluto might be just another minor object, perhaps to be replaced as a bona fide planet by the newly discovered Sedna. I think astronomer nexperts are merely try-

ing to replace an older generation. Pluto and Sedna are just starchy gossip to me. (Think of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie replacing Ben Affleck and anyone named Jennifer.)

On the other hand, nexpert wisdom can cut close to home. When Tom Ridge was the Homeland Security chief, he would heighten our anxiety by raising the color-coded threat alerts. Now that he's out of the job and a nexpert, he says there was often only flimsy evidence to raise the levels, with which he disagreed at the time. That's pretty tricky nexpertism, Tom. It's also troubling. It makes me wonder whether the government was using the threat levels as a diversion, a kind of color coda to the weapons-of-mass-destruction distraction.

Most nexpert wisdom doesn't have such ramifications. Take water. Please. When I was growing up, the experts told us not to drink water during heavy exercise because our stomachs would explode. When I was grown, we were told to "hydrate" constantly so our brains wouldn't implode. The regimen of

Drink wine. No, don't! Pluto's a planet. Or is it? It's tough to know what to believe these days. So I'm going to pick and choose my facts — until I hear otherwise.



By Suzie Parker, USA TODAY

eight glasses a day coincided with nexpert information that expensive bottled spring water was better than free tap water. Now we're told to cut back on water during exercise. I hope, there's nothing wrong with all that spring water.

Young theorists

Though many nexperts are older theorists who have worked their way onto the look-at-me lane on the information highway, two of the most interesting have pushed their way on with new books.

One is *Freakonomics* by economist Steven Levitt, co-written with Stephen Dubner. This bestseller has gotten attention for nexpert revisionism, especially the theory that *Roe v. Wade*, by making it easier to abort unwanted children, is the main cause for the drop in crime over the past decade. The previous

hypothesis had to do with improved police procedures.

The other smart young nexpert is Steven Johnson. His recent book, *Everything Bad is Good for You*, is summed up in his subtitle — *How Today's Popular Culture is Actually Making Us Smarter*. He writes that the current spate of video games and TV shows, because they are more complex and demanding than what they have replaced, is creating a more skilled audience. Would the audience be even more intelligent and competent if it were reading books and discussing them? Too late,

that's from several generations of experts ago.

There's simply no stopping the oncoming waves of nexperts with their ever-changing pronouncements on chocolate, prostate cancer treatment, music, warfare, clothing, the future of humanity. My tendency to discount the nexperts scares me. I don't want to start disbelieving everything new and then everything period. I will become paralyzed as a person and as a citizen. The old line "A pox on both their houses" might sound fair and balanced, but it is really hopeless and dangerous. I want to find some way to integrate the new into the old, hang on to what's worthwhile and add to it.

So, I'm going to lose weight, eat chocolate, drink tap water and listen to only rap music that promotes world peace. I will believe that Pluto is a planet. At least until the nexperts disprove Galileo and declare that the sun really does revolve around the Earth. Which is flat.

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USA TODAY 7/18/05