

Commentary

Up Front: Going to work sick isn't the badge of honor it used to be

There are so many things that used to be OK that are now not OK - such as smoking in public and not wearing a seatbelt when you drive - and one of the worst offenses is going to work or to school when you're sick.

It used to be that you had to be on your deathbed before you could call in sick to work. And even then, you had to have funeral plans if you wanted to collect a paycheck. Of course, after you were dead you wouldn't need a paycheck, but it was just a way of making sure you were really on death's door and not just making excuses so you could stay home and watch soaps or play hooky at the golf course.

Being pardoned from work, however, was probably easier than being allowed to stay home from school if you were sick, especially if you had my mother.

There was a childhood poem, "The Land of Counterpane," where a kid whose mother let him stay home from school because he was sick spent the day playing with his toy soldiers. If my mother had caught me playing with dolls when I was home sick, she would have rolled me out of bed, made me put on my clothes and march out there in the wind and sleet and hail and get back to school.

Kids were tough back then. Our mothers loved us but they had no patience for wimps.

Not only did we have to be darned sick before we got any special treatment, mothers used to actually seek out diseases to expose their kids. When I was a kid and somebody had the chicken pox all the mothers in the neighborhood would bring their kids over to the sick kid's house to catch the virus on purpose. The thinking was once you got the disease you would be immune from then on. It was kind of a status thing to be the first kid on the block to have the measles or mumps because you could then claim to have saved the lives of all your other playmates.

These days, mothers vaccinate their children against those things. I suppose there are good reasons for that, although it's taken a lot of the fun out of being contagious.

But nowadays just try to go to work or to school with the sniffles or an upset stomach. The minute somebody detects you are carrying an infectious agent into the building you will be immediately surrounded by a hazmat team and escorted to the nearest isolation chamber. It is not cool anymore to be the spreader of diseases, and while that may have some bearing on the increased life expectancy and overall general good health of the American public it's made us a little less collegial; a little less warm; a little more standoffish.

Sometimes you just have to weigh how much you're going to worry about getting sick. Being overly cautious can limit your social life. I took my dogs out for a long walk last week after a fresh snowfall. They warn you these days not to eat the snow, like we did when we were kids, because of all the pollutants in the air.

But fresh snow is hard to resist. I scooped up a big handful and put it into my mouth.

It tasted a little like diesel, but it was delicious.

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