

THE DAILY RECORD

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Homeland insecurity

They took away my wife's Sensodyne toothpaste at the airport. We were flying down to Manhattan to see "Hamlet," so I suppose the thought could have been that an outraged retired schoolteacher might attack the Statue of Liberty with a huge toothbrush and whiten the statue's teeth beyond all recognition.

I'd warned my wife: "I think you've got to have a small tube of toothpaste in order to get on the airplane."

She wouldn't listen.

All she knew was that her teeth would hurt if she didn't use the Sensodyne, and that was all there was to it. Maybe I should have started to suspect her immediately. In any event, the TSA nabbed her.

"This is over three ounces, ma'am. You can't take this on the plane with you."

So we had to throw away the brand new tube of toothpaste.

With the H1N1 virus running rampant, coupled with the fact that we've not yet evolved to the point where we have learned diseases are spread by shaking hands — and our American bodies apparently cannot bow like the Japanese do and we can't wave or do something other than touch each other because civilization, as we know it, will come to a screeching halt — I bought all kinds of hand sanitizer while in Manhattan.

On the way back to Rochester, we must have had about 12 different items — each in containers holding three ounces or less — crammed into a plastic baggie so the nice inspectors could see for certain that none of the tubes, bottles or containers of any sort individually held more than three ounces.

The requirement puzzles me, since one we carried was a new spray-type hand disinfectant, and we also were transporting a very full three-ounce bottle of gel hand disinfectant. My rudimentary recollection of chemistry tells me each of those is highly flammable.

Apparently the government has figured out that someone who wishes to do us harm is incapable of taking bad chemicals — dangerous either individually or when mixed — and figuring out that if they put each separately into three-ounce containers, they possibly could take them out of the containers and thereby collectively get on board with an awful lot of dangerous stuff.

That is disturbing.

What if the bad guys figure that out?

Even more importantly, what if my wife's teeth start to hurt again?

That may not seem like much to you, but it's important to her and, for reasons I won't go into here, it's important to me, too.

Anyway, now we have thousands of people flying around in tens of thousands of airplanes with several gazillion ounces of who knows what, all neatly tucked in little three-ounce bottles and containers, which collectively might be able to take down a tanker.

As if that isn't enough to bring on countless nights of insomnia, as we flew back from New York my wife scanned in the bar code to retrieve our boarding passes. Since all of us are used to answering "yes," by rote like an automaton, in response to stupid questions such as "are you sure you want to download the thing you just told us you wanted to download," my wife pushed "yes" when the question popped up wondering whether she was carrying any hazardous materials or dangerous items.

Nothing happened!

In fact, apparently the program is set up so that if a bad guy finally decides to confess he's about to do something bad, and has the weapons and wherewithal to do so, the machine will give him a second chance to really think about whether he wants to let the world know about it.

I wonder how effective all of it truly is. When my wife pressed that button, guys with AK-47s in black suits should have started rappelling down the walls around us.

Nothing happened.

Even more disturbing, about two years ago when I was in New York City, I made sure to pay cash for everything, except a hotel room. It was a hotel at which my friend had convinced me we needed to stay, although I protested. It was the kind of place where people stayed when they wanted to prove they had money. Nonetheless, I acquiesced, and it became the only place where I used my credit card. I figured a place like that surely must be safe, but no.

Within 24 hours, a \$1,600 bar tab had been run up by someone else at the Tavern on the Green, then another hotel room was billed to my card, then an airplane ticket from Miami to California. At least when the — expletive deleted — guy got to California, he decided to economize his thievery, deciding to stay at a low rent motel and eat submarine sandwiches. The folks at the credit card company were great, and even refunded a couple of the charges I actually owed. They were surprised when I called and said you need to charge me for that because it's a legitimate expense of mine. At first they argued and said "no, that's a place in New York City," but I

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explained “there is also a place in Rochester with the same name, so you need to add it back on my bill.”

The person on the other end was pretty shocked, but eventually agreed to let me pay it.

All of it leads me to the following question: How is it that a guy could use my credit card, purchase an airline ticket under someone else's name to fly across the country, have someone in a big expensive Washington office (paid for, by me, annually on April 15) make the decision that the best way to keep us safe is by confiscating my wife's toothpaste?

A few months ago — I swear what you're about to read is true — I got on an airplane and found a cigarette lighter. That's right, an actual honest-to-God lighter — just the kind of thing you can use to set things on fire. I immediately gave it to the flight attendant before the bad guys could get their hands on it. The part that really gets me is that she then proceeded to ask over the

loudspeaker whether anyone had lost their lighter.

I don't think my wife's toothpaste is the problem.

As an aside, I wish to congratulate Sheila Gaddis for winning *The Daily Record's* Nathaniel Award. She is a wonderful person and certainly deserving of it. The poor in our country don't get legal services or medical care, which is really something we should be ashamed of. So I was just thinking, maybe if we took all of those people who spend all day measuring the number of ounces in a particular container at the airport, and let them go to law school and medical school, we could fix a lot of things at once.

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