

BARBWIRE

By Barb Lumley

July 19, 2020

STATISTICS MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN OUR DAILY LIVES

Statistics have become very important in our daily lives, especially in the last few months. As of this writing we are literally being held hostage by the statistics reported on the Covid-19 virus. Every facet of our lives is affected in some way. Can we believe the statistics we are being given? I am hearing stories of tests being sent to laboratories where they are all marked positive, even the un-used swabs that were purposely included. A patient in a hospital tested positive and was retested for fifteen straight days and then counted as fifteen positive patients instead of one positive patient. Tests were sent in from patients who were never tested and came back marked positive. I ran across the following, "It is true as often stated that you can make statistics say anything you want. You pick out the right numbers and the right words to say anything you want and guide the readers/audience to believe in that direction". Let's use the following as a demonstration of how statistics can be misleading.

An executive in a large city decides he wants to purchase a farm even though he has never seen a farm or been on one and he purchases it sight unseen. He is told that the farm has dairy cows and beef cows. He decides he wants to know how many cows he owns. He does not want to get his Jimmy Choo shoes dirty by walking around the farm and counting them and he has trouble conversing with his workers since he does not speak Spanish. He orders an electronic counter installed that will count each cow as she enters the milking parlor. He also has an area set up for the beef cows where grain and alfalfa hay are available, however it is fenced and gated with a small entrance so that only one cow can enter at a time. Another counter is installed and he wants all those cows counted for one week and the results sent to him.

The next week he receives the statistics on his cows and he is delighted. He can't believe how many cows he owns! He is going to be selling thousands of pounds of milk and lots of beef! Obviously he made a good buy and with all those cows, he is going to make money!! How wise he was to listen to the salesman who talked him into buying the farm!

There is just one problem! No one explained to him that cows enter the milking parlor twice a day, seven days a week. His counter counted each cow every time she entered. So according to the statistics he received he has fourteen times more milk cows than he really owns! As for the beef cows all farmers know what healthy appetites beef cows have and each cow would go back and eat several times a day during that week and be counted every time she entered. There is no way the statistics he received could be accurate, yet he will make plans and decisions based on them.

Many people are currently being kept in limbo by the statistics of the Covid-19 virus. I am hearing stories that tend to create doubt in the numbers we are told. Statistics are used to guide our lives in so many ways, including our health, the medicine we take, the food we eat, the places we should live, our weather, where to send our children to school, and much, much more. But should we always believe them? I recently ran across some interesting sayings about statistics. Mark Twain said, "Facts are stubborn things but statistics are pliable". "Statistics are no substitute for judgment". (Henry Clay) Another is "Most people use statistics like a drunk man uses a lamppost; more for support than illumination". My favorite saying is "Statistics are like a bikini.....they show a lot but not everything"!