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Agriculture  
Appropriations  
Energy and Utilities



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Minnesota  
House of  
Representatives

Rodney N. Searle, Speaker

February 19, 1980

Senate Nicholas Coleman  
Senate Majority Leader  
208 State Capitol  
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Nick:

I know the current political wisdom is that there should be a short legislative session in even or election years. This year seems to be no exception.

I have always questioned the wisdom of applying the excessive and unnecessary pressure to get out early, and recently came across the attached article from the December, 1979 edition of "State Legislatures".

Members have already complained about the early onset of the end-of-session trauma, rushing between multiple meetings and appointments. And we are still having limited floor sessions.

It seems to me that a recess around caucus time and another recess around Easter to allow conference committees to function in a more humane manner would be in order. Any negative public reaction to the length of time could be countered by the appearance of a less frantic finish.

Finally, you hardly need to be reminded of the two stress- and disease-related deaths and the stress-related hospitalization that have already occurred in the Senate. I am only surprised that we have not had similar tragedies in the House.

The pressures that exist in the odd years are really due to our constitutional deadline and the need for the budget and tax bills. It hardly seems necessary to repeat and even increase those pressures this year.

Sincerely,

Phyllis Kahn  
State Representative

PK/ljb

cc: Rep. Fred Norton

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## Warning to legislators: Short sessions can be hazardous to your health

Nearly half the nation's state legislatures meet for abbreviated sessions, many of them constitutionally limited to a specific number of days over a one- or two-year period. Traditionally, the last weeks of those sessions mean long, tense hours of high-pressure meetings, often involving the most serious issues of the sessions. Those closing weeks can also mean severe physical strain for legislators.

A University of New Mexico physiologist who studied the conditions of a group of legislators during the 1979 session of the New Mexico legislature found a consistent decline in physical health as the 60-day session drew to a close. Dr. Hemming Atterbom, director of the Human Performance Laboratory at the university in Albuquerque, will do further research during the upcoming 30-day session. He says his results could lead to an exercise program for legislators and, more generally, a recommendation for longer sessions.

According to Dr. Atterbom, the culprit is fatigue, which he defines as "the inability to respond to tension." The doctor monitored 23 legislators (22 senators and one representative) during the last session, recording their pulse and blood pressure early in the morning on specified days and keeping track of changes throughout the day by way of electrodes attached to the lawmakers' chests.

The project began with a conversation between Dr. Atterbom and Senator John Irick of Albuquerque, a participant in the doctor's Cardiac Rehabilitation Center. Irick, 55, suffered a heart attack during the legislature's 1977 session. Since then, he has been on an exercise program under Dr. Atterbom's supervision.

"We got to talking about the legislature's short session," Irick explained. "He wondered if it would be possible to measure stress. I suggested it to our Committee on Committees in the Senate. Dr. Atterbom made a presentation on how he wanted to do it."

Volunteers were recruited on the Senate floor, where more than half the members wanted to take part. One lone representative asked to be included, although facilities were maintained in the Senate chamber. The doctor had a place behind the rostrum to monitor from," Irick said.

"I took part," the senator continued. "I think it was pretty interesting for most of the fellows. We had these little transmitters taped to our chests. In my case, when I was involved in some pretty heavy stuff,

everything went up. It darn sure shows up."

When participants signed up for the program, they took a physical test and filled out a questionnaire. Responses showed that the lawmakers got less sleep and had poorer eating habits during the legislative session than during the rest of the year. Dr. Atterbom was surprised to find, however, that the session had little effect on their use of tobacco and alcohol.

With some assistants from the University of New Mexico, the doctor observed activities and their effects in the Senate chamber and sat in on some committee meetings in which his subjects were involved.



"What I think I found by observation," he said, "is that the legislators who appeared to be in poorer shape compensated with their work behavior. They didn't stay up as late." No particular category of lawmaker was more adversely affected than another, he said. Participants ranged in age from 28 to 74.

"The younger ones, the ones in better shape were more active . . . It was detrimental to several . . . When an athlete overtrains, there is a reaction. The same kind of thing happened there."

Three days before the end of the session, a 32-year-old senator from Albuquerque, Sen. Tom Rutherford, reported to Dr. Atterbom at 8 a.m., was tested, wired and released. He had attended committee meetings until 3 a.m. before beginning the day, during which he skipped lunch, chaired a committee meeting and presented a bill before another.

When Sen. Rutherford reported back to Dr. Atterbom at 5:15 p.m., he

had contracted a serious cold. His heart had increased by 23 beats per minute, up from 76 that morning to 99 by late afternoon, and the day wasn't over yet; he was on his way to an evening reception.

In an interview with National Public Radio, Dr. Atterbom said the increased heartbeat was "a much greater increase than a worker in industry would experience. That would be indicative of fatigue. The accumulated effect on fatigue and stress would make him more susceptible to disease."

"We're still working on the data," he said. "This year, we'll look into the physical condition and its effect on stress. If the study indicates a definite need for it," Dr. Atterbom said, "an exercise program will be made available for lawmakers the next year and a study of that program will be made."

He points out that a longer legislative session could be beneficial to legislators' health, but only if the work is distributed evenly throughout the session and not allowed to accumulate during the final weeks. Several state legislatures, the doctor said, have written him for information about his research.

Sen. Irick said long-range results of the study are uncertain at this point. "I suppose Dr. Atterbom's conclusions will have some weight," he said. "It's very apparent that legislators need more rest and more exercise, especially in states like ours. The work piles up."

**Deborah Bowditch**