Eye-opening insights about shut-eye

By Glenn C. Altschuler (Special to The Oregonian)

We sleep away almost one-third of our lives. We know we need rest, but getting to dreamland isn't always easy. These days, about one in every four Americans has some sleeping pills in the medicine cabinet.

In “Dreamland: Adventures in the Strange Science of Sleep,” David K. Randall, a senior reporter at Reuters, solves some mysteries — and busts some myths — about sleep. Drawing on the latest research on sharing beds with infants, naps, dreams, apnea, circadian rhythms, sleep-walking and sleep deprivation, his lively and informative book demonstrates that our health, sex, relationships, and job performance depend on the quantity and quality of the hours we spend between the sheets.

“Dreamland” is full of eye-opening insights. According to Randall, sleep deprivation, a major cause of “friendly fire” and fights between American soldiers and civilians, is being addressed by making a sleep-tracking monitor standard gear for every combat unit. About a third of big-rig truck drivers have moderate or severe sleep apnea, and are seven times more likely than their wide-awake counterparts to get into accidents.

And, Randall indicates, it is possible to commit a murder while sleep-walking. Randall acknowledges that the science of sleep is in its infancy. To be sure, the evidence that the performance of students improves when classes begin an hour or two later in the day is “unambiguous.”

And it does seem pretty clear that Freud’s interpretation of dreams was “misguided,” the mind isn’t really “masking its concerns in symbols or storylines.”

We are not yet certain, Randall suggests, that sleeping in separate beds enhances the overall health and well-being of couples. Advocates of “co-sleeping” with infants and supporters of “the cry-it-out method,” he writes, are “both a little right, and a little wrong.” And psychologists continue to debate whether the criminal code should hold sleepwalkers who do not take the medication prescribed to control their conditions accountable by deeming their actions “semi-voluntary.”

With the advent of the Zeo Personal Sleep Coach, a black fabric headband with a hard plastic square above the eyebrows, Randall reveals the biological markers of pillow time can be monitored with precision, like cholesterol, blood pressure, and body weight. And we are on the cusp of understanding what contributes to sound sleep hygiene (including a consistent bedtime, dimming the bedroom lights, turning off the TV, and taking a cool shower a half-hour before hitting the sack, and laying off of alcohol and coffee).

It may help as well to eliminate the pillow talk. Unless, of course, you are discussing “Dreamland.”

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