

A Case for Bare Feet

Paul J. Lucas*, Michael M. Berrow, Richard K. Frazine, and Robert A. Neinast

Summary

This paper describes *barefooters*: responsible people from all walks of life who greatly enjoy going barefoot as a lifestyle choice because of the pleasure it offers. Despite the fact that there are no laws or health department regulations against bare feet, barefooters are increasingly and unnecessarily being discriminated against, often in a hostile manner. Additionally, not only is going barefoot natural and healthy, but many shoes are harmful, especially for children and runners.

1. Introduction

1.1. Motivation

The motivation for this paper is to explain about a segment of the population: barefooters. A *barefooter*, quite simply, is a person who greatly enjoys going barefoot as a lifestyle choice. This means going barefoot most of the time most everywhere, not just around the house or at a beach. Why? It's a combination of it feeling good and being uncomfortable even in the world's purportedly most-comfortable shoes. But it's more than just "feeling good": It's a true delight, a delicious and sensual pleasure from the soles of our feet, an often-forgotten organ of *touch*. Barbara Holland, in her book *Endangered Pleasures* [1], has written about this. An excerpt is:

TWO out of every five adults take off their shoes whenever they can, and the other three don't seem to mind having their feet smothered.

I arrive at this figure by way of my own family. One of my brothers and I go barefoot even in winter, to the continuing echo of our mother's voice saying, "Aren't your feet cold?" and "Where are your shoes?" and "Put something on your feet!" Our three siblings wear shoes. Or sandals, or bedroom slippers, or sometimes just socks, but always something to render their feet deaf and blind. I don't know whether or not there's a genetic component involved.

My brother and I don't long to rip off the rest of our clothes; we don't wear impractical shoes; our feet in shoes don't hurt; we aren't seeking relief from the pinch. It's just that we're always, at some level of consciousness, aware of whatever's wrapped around us down there, as of a hand lightly but immovably across our mouths all day. For us and others like us, the moment of taking off the footwear is a relief and a joy, and in summer, with the barefoot hours extended into days, our personalities change. Barefoot, we're almost always at peace. We're gentle and tolerant with our fellow man. Stress and anxiety evaporate and grief itself seems bearable as long as our feet are free.

...

For some of us, the soul is resident in the sole, and yearns ceaselessly for light and air and self-expression. Our feet are our very selves. The touch of floor or carpet, grass or mud or asphalt, speaks to us loud and clear from the foot, that scorned and lowly organ as dear to us as our eyes and ears.

...

* Address for correspondence: Paul J. Lucas, P.O. Box 1365, Mountain View, CA 94042-1365, USA; pjl@barefooters.org

Yes, Mother, some of the time our feet are cold. And yes, we do run the risk of stepping on bits of broken glass in the house and, outside, bees in the clover. As they say in the Pentagon, it's an acceptable risk. Highly acceptable.

However, things are not so simple as just removing one's shoes and going barefoot. In western society, particularly in the United States, bare feet are becoming more unwelcome in many establishments due to beliefs engendered by rampant misinformation, and barefooters are prejudged and often viewed with contempt, sometimes to the point of driving them into a "barefoot closet." (The fact that some people go barefoot anyway despite strong social pressure to "put your shoes on" is evidence of the importance going barefoot has and of the pleasure it offers.)

Such negativity about bare feet was not always the case: Many older Americans fondly recall their youth when they themselves went barefoot for days or months at a time, sometimes even to school.

The real motivation for this paper is not only to explain about barefooters, but to set the facts straight and, with any luck, to regain the freedom our parents and grandparents had to go barefoot. We do this for ourselves and our children.

1.2. Do not Stereotype

A preference for having bare feet cannot be negatively associated with anything in a person's character, world view, or lifestyle; nor with their honesty, intelligence, religion, political views, or socioeconomic status; much less with their willingness to respect the rights and property of others, or willingness to behave in a quiet and considerate manner.

There are those who associate bare feet with drop-outs, junkies, hippies and beggars. While there are such people who do go barefoot as well, in general this is very wide off the mark. Barefooters are responsible men and women from many walks of life. We are engineers, lecturers, photographers, authors, researchers, and company directors. We are conservative, liberal, and include devout followers of many faiths, as well as agnostics. Barefooters are found in all age groups and among all races. All we have in common is the belief that going barefoot is more comfortable than wearing shoes, more beneficial to our foot health, and more sensually enjoyable. Many among us like to go hiking in bare feet, and consequently are very environmentally aware and eager to protect the world we live in.

In our experience, bare feet have nothing whatsoever to do with disrespect, vandalism, or other destructive behavior. For example, it is shod people who break glass bottles; it is often barefooters who voluntarily clean up the glass. Additionally, bare feet are *silent* and they do not scuff, mark, or damage the surfaces they contact. It is difficult to imagine anything more respectful.

1.3. Not a New Phenomenon

As mentioned, bare feet are sometimes associated with an outmoded 1960s stereotype. Barefooters have existed long before then. For example, in 1914, James L. M. Bain wrote a paper entitled *The Barefoot League* [2] on the "virtues and delights of barefoot walking." An excerpt is:

Now, when I grew up to manhood I did not give up the practice. I loved the touch of the earth, and I used every opportunity to satisfy this love. Thus, when I lived among the armailli of the Mountains of the Gruyere, I seldom, during these years, had a shoe on my foot during the summer.

What the delights of climbing these grassy slopes, whose steeps run up thousands of feet, clothed with flowers whose scent and colour can be perceived miles away, or of climbing along the sides of the warm rocks barefoot, I cannot tell you. This theme alone would demand a whole poem.

Thus have I so carried the practice on through my youth and manhood, that, even during these mature years, when I go out to take my morning ramble to meet the dawn among the gentle valley or to climb a mountain, I never think of taking even a sandal out with me, and, I vouch for it, I never feel the want of them.

But not on the hills alone and not on the high road only, and not only at the hour when mankind is yet asleep, do I venture thus forth in so unconventional a way. Verily no.

For some years past I have tasted the delight and realised fully the energy of the joy of drinking in the sun's heat by walking on the hot pavements of London and other cities, and even Edinburgh, the Athens of all good taste! This I have done for miles on end, and instead of feeling tired at the finish, my body was simply aglow with radiant energy.

2. Discrimination

There are two kinds of people who discriminate against barefooters: Those who have no problems with bare feet, but think they are against some law or regulation, and those who dislike bare feet in general and will use any reason at their disposal to justify their view.

2.1. Source of Discrimination

The discrimination against barefooters in part comes from negative images some people have of bare feet. Frazine, in his book *The Barefoot Hiker* [3], wrote:

Bare feet are seen in various situations as being:

<i>carefree</i>	<i>dangerous</i>
<i>clean</i>	<i>disgraceful</i>
<i>comfortable</i>	<i>disrespectful</i>
<i>considerate</i>	<i>embarrassing</i>
<i>expressive</i>	<i>impolite</i>
<i>fun</i>	<i>improper</i>
<i>graceful</i>	<i>inconsiderate</i>
<i>healthy</i>	<i>irresponsible</i>
<i>human</i>	<i>shameful</i>
<i>impulsive</i>	<i>slovenly</i>
<i>natural</i>	<i>uncivilized</i>
<i>practical</i>	<i>uncomfortable</i>
<i>sensitive</i>	<i>unconventional</i>
<i>sensuous</i>	<i>unsanitary</i>
<i>uninhibited</i>	<i>vulnerable</i>

Bare feet are seen in various situations as showing:

<i>confidence</i>	<i>backwardness</i>
<i>freedom</i>	<i>carelessness</i>
<i>independence</i>	<i>hopelessness</i>
<i>innocence</i>	<i>humility</i>
<i>simplicity</i>	<i>poverty</i>
<i>youth</i>	<i>unpreparedness</i>

Obviously, barefooters would choose the words in the left columns to describe bare feet whereas those who dislike bare feet would choose the words in the right columns.

An unfortunate human tendency is to discriminate against things not understood. Non-barefooters don't understand barefooters (and vice-versa). The image they seem to have of barefooters is that they are immature and irresponsible people who apparently have been unable to find their shoes because of a slovenly lifestyle, perhaps compounded by alcohol or drug abuse, and a dulled awareness of their surroundings. As mentioned in §1.2, this is very wide off the mark.

We barefooters go barefoot because doing so gives us a *heightened* awareness of our surroundings. The soles of our feet are exquisitely sensitive by nature, and years of going barefoot only make them more so. A non-barefooter will see an attractive young couple walking barefoot across a gravel road and think, "They must be so desensitized so as to feel nothing at all," based on the incorrect belief that walking barefoot on gravel *must* be painful. If he only knew: They do feel the gravel, every piece of it, as well as the few blades of grass that may be growing up through it. That's why they smile.

They've been barefoot all summer, or maybe all year. Their bare feet feel everything—far more than he can imagine—but they have long ago learned to reserve the sensation of pain only for those things that actually threaten to hurt them. Their bare feet are no threat to their safety; they have learned to depend on them for their safety. As barefooters, they use all of their senses somewhat differently than he does. Of course they watch the ground with their eyes—their feet and eyes and ears and in fact all of their senses work together in a way that he can never really understand—because he, by his own choice, is bereft of one of his senses. That is whole his problem: He has traded away one of his natural senses—perhaps for a false sense of safety, or perhaps just for conformity—and they have been unwilling to make that trade. Perhaps, somewhere deep down, he knows the truth about his own shoddy bargain and he resents them for it.

Another unfortunate human tendency is to try to convince others of the “wrongness” of their choices simply because it helps those who have merely “followed the crowd” without making true individual choices feel “better” about it. Barefooters may be seen, by those who had protective (but misinformed) parents, as people who failed to listen to their own parents' warnings about going barefoot. This is a source of further resentment: “Why do you get to go barefoot whereas I must wear shoes because my parents told me to?” These sources of resentment may be why he thinks as he does and why he wants to exclude them.

2.2. Laws and Regulations

First, let's be clear about the distinction between a law and a regulation. *Laws* are created and passed by lawmakers, typically elected officials, from city council members, county board members, state representatives, up to the Congress of the United States. Violation of a law can result in a fine, arrest, imprisonment, and even execution. *Regulations* are created by officials of some government agency (usually county or state). Violation of a regulation can result in a fine or revocation of a license or permit. (Performing some action or service without the relevant license or permit, however, may be against the law.)

Now then, we state:

Having bare feet in public or in a place of business open to the public (including restaurants) is not against any law. (It is also not against the law to drive barefoot anywhere in the United States [4].)

If bare feet were against the law, “No Bare Feet” signs would have the relevant municipal code or statute number on them just like official “No...” signs posted by municipalities. We further state:

Having bare feet in public or in a place of business open to the public (including restaurants) is not against any health department regulation in any state the authors are aware of.

Health departments are concerned with the storage, handling, and preparation of food and of the hygiene of *employees*; but they are totally unconcerned with the manner of dress of *patrons* (or their hygiene, for that matter). During a conversation with a health inspector in California [5], she said, “As far as the health department is concerned, you can enter a restaurant nude.”

To be thorough, letters were written to nearly every state health department inquiring as to whether there is any regulation against bare feet.* To date, 42 states have responded [6].† All of them have confirmed that there is no such regulation. There are no health department regulations against bare feet because they are simply not a health issue. Bare soles do sometimes get dirty, granted; but so what? Are shoe soles clean? Put simply: somebody's bare feet can in no way affect anybody else. Part of the letter from the South Carolina health department reads, “The attire of a customer would have little, if any, affect on the wholesomeness of the food.”

It's interesting to note that somebody's bare *hands* can be a health risk since hands not only come into contact with many things touched by other people's hands after they have perhaps coughed, sneezed, touched germ-laden doorknobs and handrails, but hands are what people use to eat with.

* There was difficulty obtaining the correct addresses for the health departments in Alaska and Minnesota.

† The states that have not responded to date are: AK, HI, MA, MS, NV, UT, VT, and WA.

There is no health department regulation mandating that patrons must wash their hands before eating.

For another example of how poorly some people think things through, consider a business near a beach. This business has barefooted customers all day long. Not only has nobody ever contracted any sort of illness from somebody else's bare feet, but nobody thinks anything of bare feet because it's "OK" to be barefoot near a beach. Now, transport this *same* business a few miles inland. Suddenly, without any change to the inside of the business, bare feet are an alleged health risk. Does this make sense?

2.3. Enforcement by Intimidation

Despite the fact that bare feet are not against any health department regulation, one sometimes sees a sign that reads:

NO BARE FEET
by Order of the Health Department

Such signs are outright lies. Several barefooters have written to company headquarters to point out this fact. In all cases, the businesses admit their "mistake"—they have to since there is no health department regulation. Most of their responses, however, say something to the effect of "...but we have higher standards." But why? The types of businesses in question are typically fast-food restaurants that will serve anybody having a pulse and money, not up-scale establishments. The prohibition against bare feet where any manner of clothing, hair style or color, tattoos and body piercings are permitted is nonsensical.

Despite the lack of truth in many "No Bare Feet" signs, many such signs alleging a health department regulation remain. The reason? The authors believe that such signs are intentionally posted because:

- It allows the business to shift the "blame" for the regulation off of itself onto the health department thus giving the impression that the "nice" business might otherwise allow bare feet, but can't because the "mean" health department won't allow them to.
- It puts "muscle" behind the regulation. We suspect that many barefooters who don't know the truth sheepishly comply out of intimidation for fear of legal action being taken against them.
- It's far easier to claim some numberless health department "order" than it would be to cite a non-existent municipal code number.
- It reinforces the myth that bare feet are a health risk to the public thereby making them less inclined to go barefoot.

Some of these reasons are also believed by some health department officials [6]:

Perhaps the signs which say "by order of the health department" are put up so that management can avoid arguments with customers. (New Mexico)

It is my experience that most restaurants post signs that say footwear is a health code requirement to enforce their policy and remain blameless if they have a complaint from someone that wants to be barefoot. (Ohio)

We say "intentionally posted" because we find it difficult to believe that businesses who are supposedly knowledgeable about health department regulations in order to handle and prepare food for the public safely would be ignorant of the fact that there is no regulation against bare feet. If some businesses truly are ignorant regarding bare feet, we wonder what more important and truly health-affecting regulations they might also be ignorant of—a frightening thought.

2.4. The “Liability” Argument

Once the law and health department myths are shown to be false, the next argument used against barefooters is the infamous “broken glass” argument that is: “You might cut yourself and sue us.” From personal experience, we know this fear to be unfounded. Lucas, in [7], stated:

Yes, broken glass exists, but it is not “all over the place” even on city streets. Unless it’s a recent breakage, it gets kicked/swept into cracks, against walls, or right against curbs and isn’t strewn about. For the little glass that does remain, again, just watch where you’re going! But, for the seasoned barefooter with tough, thick soles, most broken glass is not a problem even if you step directly on it.

Dr. Steven E. Robbins, et al, in [8], corroborates Lucas’s last sentence:

Another aspect of barefoot safety is risk of puncture wounds. A report has shown that when the plantar surface is subjected to localized load via sharp deforming objects, it deforms so as to contain the object in the void created by the deforming object, thus resisting perforation. Whereas the risk of plantar surface puncture wounds must be greater when barefoot if compared with wearing shoes, this skin defense makes the sole of the foot reasonably resistant to penetration.

Even if a barefooter did get a piece of glass in a sole, s/he would most likely not sue the business owner. We base this on correspondence with many barefooters. Barefooters highly prize the freedom to go barefoot and would not do anything to jeopardize that freedom. Additionally, liability case law makes a successful lawsuit extremely unlikely. In order to successfully sue a business owner for any injury, four elements must be proven: a duty of care to the customer, a breach of that duty (negligence), a causal link between the breach and harm, and actual harm or damage [9].

Regarding duty of care: In general, a business owner is *not* the insurer of a customer’s safety. The owner must only guard against unreasonable risks about which the customer would not be otherwise aware, or a risk that the customer could not appreciate [10]. In addition, under the doctrine of “primary assumption of the risk,” no duty of care is owed as to risks inherent in a given activity [11]. It is pretty clear that a business owner has no special duty of care to a barefooter. It is the barefooter who has the superior knowledge over the business owner, and the barefoot customer is fully expected to appreciate any inherent risk in going barefoot.

In fact, business owners who post signs *requiring* footwear in their stores for “liability reasons” might be opening themselves up for “duty of care” lawsuits. These signs could be interpreted as the business owner proclaiming a duty of care in assuring the safety of a customer’s footwear (by deeming one type of footwear unsafe and not allowed, the business owner has taken under his or her wing the whole range of possibly unsafe footwear). If a customer on high heels or platform shoes were to severely sprain their ankle because of their shoes, the business owner might be liable, since he or she has proclaimed by his or her sign a “duty of care” interest in customers’ footwear.

There is an additional doctrine that applies: comparative (or, in some states, even the more severe contributory) negligence. If, somehow, a lawsuit made it past the “duty of care” barrier (already unlikely), a jury is required to weigh the relative negligence of the business owner and the barefooter. Any award would then be reduced by the amount of negligence attributed to the barefooter, and in many states, if the barefooter is found to be more than 50% negligent, *no* award is allowed. Even if a barefooter were to step on some broken glass, any rational jury would think: “What did you expect? You were barefoot!” No award would be made.

Another version of the “liability” argument is when a business further claims that it can not admit bare feet because their insurance company forbids it in their policy. The authors are unaware of any insurance policy that forbids bare feet or of the existence of any data showing that bare feet are a statistically-significant risk that would motivate actuaries to add such a restriction to policies.

An insurance agent questioned about this said that there are no such restrictions in liability insurance policies [12]. Given that, we believe that the claim of insurance policies forbidding bare feet is just like the claim that health departments forbid bare feet: bogus. We further believe that such claims are intentionally made for reasons similar if not identical to those made about health department regulations.

Even though bare feet do not pose any real liability risk, if a business owner wishes to post a sign, we think a much more reasonable sign could read:

Bare Feet
at own risk

Business such as auto-repair shops have signs that read “Not responsible for fire or theft,” and car-washes have “Not responsible for items left in car, damage, or antennas.” Since there are many such businesses still in existence, implying that they haven’t been sued into bankruptcy, such signs are apparently sufficient to ward off lawsuits. Therefore, a “Bare Feet at own risk” sign should also be sufficient while still allowing people to go barefoot if they choose to do so.

2.5. The “Offensive” Argument

Another popular argument given is that bare feet are somehow “offensive to other customers.” How can bare feet be offensive yet feet with thin straps on the tops and a thin layer of material on the soles suddenly make them not offensive when there is little difference in overall appearance? It must be that some people are offended by the mere *knowledge* that somebody else’s feet are bare and this gets back to the source for discrimination against bare feet mentioned in §2.1.

But why is there a general belief that somebody has *the right not to be offended*? We propose that this is the price one pays for living in a society supposedly as free as ours. In *Ferguson v. Gies* [13], the supreme court of Michigan stated:

The man who goes either by himself or with his family to a public place must expect to meet and mingle with all classes of people. He cannot ask, to suit his caprice or prejudice or social views, that this or that man shall be excluded because he does not wish to associate with them. He may draw his social line as closely as he chooses at his home, or in other private places, but he cannot in a public place carry the privacy of his home with him, or ask that people not as good or great as he is shall step aside when he appears.

Another thing we fail to understand is why are easily-offended customers opinions’ given more consideration than barefooters’ opinions? Barefooters are customers too. We suspect the “squeaky wheel” theory.

It comes down to this: if some people have a problem with bare feet, tough—it’s *their* problem and they need to get over it. There are things that even some barefooters find offensive in others, but we value their individuality, freedom, and comfort more than our personal sensibilities. For example, one can patronize many a business with green, spiked hair, studded leather apparel, body piercings in several locations, or unruly, noisy children (who truly are an intrusion), and be served without question. But, venture into a business nicely dressed with bare feet and forget it. Does this make sense?

2.6. Arbitrary Discrimination

We believe discrimination against bare feet to be arbitrary. In the state of California, arbitrary discrimination is a violation of the *Unruh Civil Rights Act* [14]. (We would expect and hope that other states have similar legislation.) The act states:

All persons within the jurisdiction of this state are free and equal, and no matter what their sex, race, color, religion, ancestry, or national origin are entitled to the full and equal accommodations, advantages, facilities, privileges, or services in all business establishments of every kind whatsoever.

This section shall not be construed to confer any right or privilege on a person which is conditioned or limited by law or which is applicable alike to persons of every sex, color, race, religion, ancestry, or national origin.

As written, this would appear to leave barefooters out in the cold because discrimination against bare feet is not mentioned. However, there are elaborations and cases extending the bounds of the Unruh Act. In *Cox* [15], it was stated:

The nature of the 1959 amendments [to the Unruh Act], the past judicial interpretation of the act, and the history of the legislative action that extended the statutes' scope, indicate that identification of particular bases of discrimination—color, race, religion, ancestry, and national origin—added by the 1959 amendment, is illustrative rather than restrictive.

Although the legislation has been invoked primarily by persons alleging discrimination on racial grounds, its language and its history compel the conclusion that the Legislature intended to prohibit all arbitrary discrimination by business establishments. ... We therefore conclude that a business generally open to the public may not arbitrarily exclude a would-be customer from its premises and, upon customer's refusal to leave, subject him to criminal conviction.

This sentiment was supported by the Attorney General Evelle J. Younger [16] who stated:

The principal question is whether the prohibition of the [Unruh] Act is limited to discrimination on the basis of sex, race, color, religion, ancestry, or national origin. We conclude that it is not.

This sentiment is further supported in *Winchell v. English* [17]:

[The] Unruh Civil Rights act is to be given a liberal, not a strict, construction with a view to effect its object and to promote justice.

as well as in the other cases [18] [19] [20] [21].

It is true that going barefoot, unlike being of a particular sex, race, ancestry, or national origin, is a personal choice. Some might argue that, being a personal choice rather than a condition of birth, it deserves no civil rights protection; however, another interesting excerpt from *Cox* is:

Neither municipality nor shopping center may exclude individuals who wear long hair or unconventional dress ... merely because of such characteristics.

Clearly, having long hair or unconventional dress is a choice, but, even so, apparently are unacceptable justifications for discrimination. Therefore, shouldn't having bare feet also be an unacceptable justification for discrimination?

Also remember that the freedoms of speech and association protected by the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution, perhaps the most prized freedoms in this country, are protections of what we say and with whom we associate, both of which we have *choice* in.

The second paragraph of the Unruh Act, however, is problematic. Essentially, it says that discrimination and exclusion is permitted provided that it is done “across the board,” e.g., a policy wherein bare feet are not permitted for all people regardless of their sex, color, race, etc., would be legal. But the above wherein individuals may not be excluded for wearing long hair or unconventional dress is prohibited presumably even if it were applied across the board to all people. Given that, we would expect that discrimination against and exclusion of bare feet would also be so prohibited.

2.7. An Erosion of Liberty

The state of affairs for barefooters are only getting worse with time as more “No Bare Feet” signs appear. For example, the Berkeley Public Library recently added a “shoes required” rule. The library eliminated a freedom by adding a single line to a list of rules. There was no hoopla or news coverage: a freedom was *silently* eliminated.

The 5th and 14th amendments to the U.S. Constitution establish a “sphere of personal liberty” about every person wherein certain rights exist with the words:

...nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law.

Those rights are generally held to increase in sanctity with proximity to a person's body. Our feet are part of us and they belong to us. Unless a *compelling state interest* can be demonstrated, anyone presuming to tell us how, or indeed whether, we should cover them is intruding upon our very persons.

We believe that, especially in the case of a public government facility funded by tax dollars, such as a public library, far more than a privately-owned business open to the public, a policy forbidding bare feet impinges upon our liberty and is therefore unconstitutional.

2.8. The “Barefoot Closet”

Many barefooters, prior to discovering that there are others like them, felt that they were “alone” and “weird” in their desire to go barefoot. We went barefoot to places (sometimes only at night) where we were reasonably sure that we wouldn't run into anybody we knew for fear of what they might think (the negative images of bare feet in §2.1). Bain, in [2], also acknowledged this fear when he wrote:

...and not only at the hour when mankind is yet asleep, do I venture thus forth in so unconventional a way ...

This fear, combined with the myths of bare feet being against the law or against a health department regulation, is enough to drive some barefooters into a “barefoot closet” and into wearing shoes for the sake of “conformity.”

We have received notes from other barefooters stating that our existence has “validated” their lives. We believe that there are many more people out there who would *love* to go barefoot but are too “closeted” to do so. This is very sad: Why should it be that doing something as simple, natural, and pleasurable as walking barefoot should carry such a stigma?

3. Health

In addition to being pleasurable, going barefoot is healthy and many barefooters go barefoot for the beneficial effects also. In fact, some barefooters feel *safer* when barefoot than when wearing shoes.

3.1. Barefoot is what Nature Intended

Going barefoot is natural. Yet some non-barefooters *actually* think it's unnatural and that humans, alone among all the other species on the planet, have feet that are somehow uniquely inadequate and fragile. This, however, makes no sense if one merely takes the time to *think* it through. Dr. Steele F. Stewart, in [22], noted:

Millions of Indians, both American and Asian, and Congoids wander their native savannas and rain forests without protection, inconvenience, or complaint. Footgear, therefore, would appear to be unnecessary.

*...
We should learn from primitives the pleasure and painlessness of going barefoot.*

Additionally, Robbins, et al, in [23], stated:

The opinion that the lower extremities are inherently fragile goes against the authors' understanding of the concept of natural selection.

And Samuel B. Shulman, in [24], stated:

People who have never worn shoes acquire very few foot defects, most of which are painless and non-debilitating. The range of their foot motions are remarkably great, allowing for full foot activity. Shoes are not necessary for healthy feet and are the cause of most foot troubles. ... Footgear is the greatest enemy of the human foot.

For those barefooters who are religious, they believe their Creator was not only competent in the design of the human foot, but it was intended to be an organ of *touch* and that joy should be graciously accepted from the world at our feet.

3.2. Going Barefoot Promotes Healthy Feet

Many non-barefooters think you can catch athlete's foot or other diseases, or develop debilitating foot conditions, by going barefoot. Regarding athlete's foot, the American Academy of Dermatology, in [25], stated:

Athlete's foot does not occur among people who traditionally go barefoot. It's moisture, sweating and lack of proper ventilation of the feet that present the perfect setting for the fungus of athlete's foot to grow.

Regarding other conditions, Stewart, in [22], stated:

All writers who have reported their observations of barefooted people agree that the untrammelled feet of natural men are free from the disabilities commonly noted among shod people—hallux vagus, bunions, hammer toes, and painful feet.

And Robbins, et al, in [23], stated:

The reports that the authors have received indicate a low frequency of plantar fasciitis in barefoot populations.

Finally, bare feet do not naturally stink. There is no difference between the sweat glands of the feet and those of the hands. Feet stink only after they have been sweating in shoes for many hours. We believe that many non-barefooters assume that *all* feet stink because *theirs* do.

3.3. Bare Feet are not Fragile

Robbins, et al, in [8] explains:

Compared with the hairy skin of the thigh, plantar skin required approximately 600% greater abrading loads to reach pain threshold. ... We conclude that plantar skin is well protected through sensory feedback from abrasive injuries when barefoot. This information combined with previous reports suggests that risk of injury when normally shod individuals perform barefoot locomotion should be low.

...
The results of studies examining barefoot activity have consistently shown that the unshod human foot is characterized by excellent mobility, primarily in the region of the forefoot, thickening of the plantar skin up to 1 cm, better alignment of the phalanges with the metatarsals causing the digits to spread, an absence of foot deformities, and mobility of the arches on loading.

...
Observations from countries where barefoot activity is the norm indicates that plantar skin eventually becomes robust and permits extremely long duration of barefoot locomotion at high average velocities, without signs of damage to plantar skin, or for that matter other lower extremity injuries.

...
In conclusion, this experiment continues to enlarge the body of knowledge suggesting how well the human foot is adapted for safe locomotion, unencumbered by footwear...

Even though plantar skin thickens as a result of going barefoot, the soles of barefooters' feet do not become thick, hard, dead layers of skin; rather, the soles become a supple layer of "living leather" still very much alive and able to *feel*. As a side note, some barefooters take pride in having thick "leather pads."

3.4. Some Shoes are Harmful

Not only is going barefoot natural and healthy, but many shoes are harmful, especially for children. Dr. Benjamin Joseph, in [26], stated:

In Europe and America flat foot is a common reason for attendance at a children's orthopaedic clinic, but in India children are seldom brought for treatment for flat foot. The few children who do attend with this complaint are from affluent urban families and they all wear shoes. In our clinic we have never seen a child from the farming community or from the family of a manual labourer who complained of flat foot.

...
The high concentration of flat foot among six-year-old children who wore shoes as compared with those who did not, implies that the critical age for development of the arch is before six years.

...
Our cross-sectional study suggests that shoe-wearing in early childhood is detrimental to the development of a normal or a high medial longitudinal arch. The susceptibility for flat foot among children who wear shoes is most evident if there is associated ligament laxity. We suggest that children should be encouraged to play unshod and that slippers and sandals are less harmful than closed-toe shoes.

Robbins, et al, in [8], agree:

Furthermore, optimum foot development occurs in the barefoot environment, and, therefore, children should be encouraged to partake in barefoot activity.

As does Shulman in [24]:

Baby shoes cause great harm to growing, formative feet. The so-called "sentimental" value of baby's shoes might well be dispensed with.

We find it incredible that, even today, many parents, through ignorance, are deforming their children's feet and, in some cases, giving them life-long debilitating conditions. Children, above all others, should be barefoot.

For adults, especially runners, all modern running shoes are dangerous as a result of their construction. Robbins, et al, in [27], stated:

Modern athletic footwear provides remarkable plantar comfort when walking, running, or jumping. However, when injurious plantar loads elicit negligible perceived plantar discomfort, a perceptual illusion is created whereby perceived impact is lower than actual impact, which results in inadequate impact-moderating behavior and consequent injury.

And, in [23] stated:

The modern running shoe and footwear in general have successfully diminished sensory feedback without diminishing the injury inducing impact, a dangerous situation.

Hence, modern running shoes with all their cushioning deprive the wearer of the natural, sensory feedback from the soles of the feet so that running improperly no longer *hurts* and, as Robbins, et al, in [23], stated, injury is the result:

Despite the modern engineered running shoe, a sports medicine clinic reported a large series of running-related injury referrals with an average weekly mileage at the time of injury of 19 miles for women and 27 miles for men. Practitioners of sports medicine have observed injuries in runners using every shoe model available. The above reports can hardly be considered an endorsement of the modern running shoe as a protective device.

We want to emphasize our phrase “running improperly” since it is not inherently painful to run barefoot provided it is done properly. Anyone who sets off running barefoot will quickly learn how to run in comfort and safety as Robbins, et al, in [23] explain:

...the authors hypothesized that there exist adaptations associated with barefoot activity that provide impact absorption and protection against running-related injuries.

Hence, a barefoot runner naturally learns how to run so that it doesn't hurt and, more importantly, this running style is safe unlike running shod. To support this claim it has been shown that barefoot runners have a very low incidence of running-related injuries as Robbins, et al, in [27], stated:

In addition, in barefoot populations running-related injuries are rare, which indicates that humans adapted to barefoot running run with lower impact than the unadapted group referred to above. This also suggests that the lower extremity is inherently durable and is made susceptible to injury by footwear use. Based on the above data, notwithstanding unsupported claims by footwear manufacturers of improved protection with their products, it seems appropriate to consider expensive athletic footwear from major manufacturers (and perhaps less expensive shoes) as unsafe.

Why are running-shoe companies making dangerous footwear? Robbins, et al, in [23], explained:

Such designs occur when an engineer looks at the foot as an inflexible lever which is delicate and thus requires packaging. Various myths persist about foot behavior due to poor understanding of its biology.

And, in [28]:

...these concepts are still being promoted by biomechanists, physicians, and manufacturers of footwear as an effective solution to the injury problem in high impact environments.

Hence, the continued belief that modern running shoes are protective persists because the “experts” say so. Another human trait that enters into play here is ego: engineers who have spent many years going to school learning and who have become “experts” don't like to be proven wrong. We're not saying that the “experts” necessarily are intentionally misleading the public, but, rather than accepting conclusions counter to their knowledge and understanding, continue to look for other explanations that support what they know to be “true.” There are also other reasons as Robbins, et al, in [28], continue:

Investors may have become too preoccupied with sophisticated hardware rather than their principal task of performing experiments which test hypotheses. Further, as much of this research is “in-house” (performed by footwear company staff or as direct contracts from footwear manufacturers), intellectual freedom may be compromised, resulting in a reluctance on the part of investors to draw conclusions that may undermine current product lines promoted by their employers or patrons.

Some might even go so far as to draw parallels between running-shoe companies and tobacco companies. Will people be suing running-shoe companies in several years for selling products resulting in permanent and debilitating injuries? It's interesting to speculate.

The solution to injuries resulting from athletic footwear is obvious: go barefoot. Robbins, et al, in [29], agree:

Obviously, the ideal solution to the running related injury problem in shod populations lies in barefoot locomotion, since protective adaptations seems to be optimized for this state. Normally shod people would have to allow sufficient time for adaptation of the plantar skin and intrinsic foot musculature (perhaps 6 weeks), and run barefoot frequently, perhaps daily, to sustain this adaptation. However, once adapted, the foot is extremely durable.

...
The lower extremity is inherently durable, and, when unencumbered by footwear, it can endure running without signs of chronic overloading, because a vigilant system restrains shock. The use of modern athletic footwear, in addition to being inferior to older footwear in moderating shock during running, renders the lower extremity susceptible to injury because of design flaws introduced by the preoccupation with optimization of plantar comfort.

...
The obvious solution to the problem of chronic overloading in shod runners is to promote barefoot running.

4. Conclusion

Barefooters are ordinary people who just so happen to like to go barefoot. In addition to being simply comfortable and fun, going barefoot is natural and healthy. Having bare feet is not against any law or health department regulation, hence there is no *compelling reason* to discriminate against bare feet and, furthermore, we believe such discrimination to be illegal. The authors find it incredible that there is so much misinformation and myth about bare feet, more so than any other body parts.

Robbins, et al, in [27], stated:

Barefoot activity when practical (no need for thermal insulation; no risk of crush injuries; social acceptability) deserves consideration since plantar sensory mediated protective adaptations seem optimized for this condition. Although this may run counter to notions prevalent in economically advanced countries recounting dangers of barefoot activity and necessity of footwear even when barefoot activity is feasible, supporting data are lacking, and many have concluded that footwear design is guided by fashion rather than health considerations.

It's interesting that "social acceptability" was mentioned. This is precisely what this paper is about: Trying to make bare feet socially acceptable to regain the freedom our parents and grandparents had to go barefoot. We do this for ourselves and our children.

References

- [1] Barbara Holland. "Bare Feet." *Endangered Pleasures*, Little, Brown and Company, 1995, pp. 28–29.
- [2] James L. M. Bain. *The Barefoot League*. Theosophical Publishing Company, London, 1914. (http://www.barefooters.org/key-works/barefoot_league.html)
- [3] Richard K. Frazine. *The Barefoot Hiker*. Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, CA, 1993.
- [4] American Automobile Association. *Digest of Motor Laws*. American Automobile Association, Heathrow, FL, 1996.
- [5] Paul J. Lucas. Phone conversation with a health inspector from the Environmental Health Department of Santa Clara County, CA, 1995.

- [6] William Shakely, et al. Responses from letters sent to state health departments, 1997. (<http://www.barefooters.org/health-dept/>)
- [7] Paul J. Lucas. *The Barefoot FAQ*, 1994. (<http://www.barefooters.org/faq/>)
- [8] Steven E. Robbins, Gerard J. Gouw, Jacqueline McClaran, and Edward Waked. "Protective Sensation of the Plantar Aspect of the Foot." *Foot & Ankle*, 14(6), 1993, pp. 347–352.
- [9] Edward J. Kionka. *Torts*, West Publishing Co., St. Paul, MN, 1992.
- [10] LaCourse v. Fleitz. *Ohio St.* 3d, p. 209.
- [11] Wattenbarger v. Cincinnati Reds, Inc. *Cal. App. 4th*, 28, p. 746.
- [12] Richard K. Frazine. Personal conversation with an insurance agent from the Thomaston Insurance Agency, Thomaston, CT, 1996.
- [13] Ferguson v. Gies. *Michigan Reporter*, 82, p. 358; *Northwestern Reporter*, 46, p. 718.
- [14] State of California. "The Unruh Civil Rights Act." *California Civil Code*, §51.
- [15] In re Theodore William Cox on Habeas Corpus. *California Reporter*, 90, 1970, p. 24.
- [16] Evelle J. Younger. "Unruh Civil Rights Act." *Attorney General's Opinions*, 58, 1975, pp. 608–613.
- [17] Winchell v. English. *California Reporter*, 20, 1976, p. 133.
- [18] Crowell v. Isaacs. *California Reporter*, 45, 1965, p. 566.
- [19] Labmert v. Mandel's of California. *Pacific Reporter 2d*, 319, 1958, p. 469.
- [20] Orloff v. Los Angeles Turf Club. *Pacific Reporter 2d*, 227, 1951, p. 449.
- [21] Stoutman v. Reilly. *Pacific Reporter 2d*, 234, 1951, p. 969.
- [22] Steele F. Stewart. "Footgear—Its History, Uses and Abuses." *Clinical Orthopaedics and Related Research*, 88, 1972, pp. 119–130.
- [23] Steven E. Robbins and Adel M. Hanna. "Running-related injury prevention through barefoot adaptations." *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, 19(2), 1987, pp. 148–156.
- [24] Samuel B. Shulman. "Survey in China and India of Feet That Have Never Worn Shoes." *Journal of the National Association of Chiropodists*, 49, 1949, pp. 26–30.
- [25] American Academy of Dermatology. "Athlete's Foot." *Patient Information Pamphlet*, American Academy of Dermatology, Schaumburg, IL, 1994.
- [26] Udaya Bhaskara Rao and Benjamin Joseph. "The Influence of Footwear on the Prevalence of Flat Foot." *The Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery*, 74B(4), 1992, pp. 525–527.
- [27] Steven E. Robbins and Gerard J. Gouw. "Athletic footwear: unsafe due to perceptual illusions." *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, 23(2), 1991, pp. 217–224.
- [28] Steven E. Robbins, Adel M. Hanna, and Gerard J. Gouw. "Overload protection: avoidance response to heavy plantar surface loading." *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, 20(1), 1988, pp. 85–92.
- [29] Steven E. Robbins and Gerard J. Gouw. "Athletic Footwear and Chronic Overloading." *Sports Medicine*, 9(2), 1990, pp. 76–85.