

## Siesta time

May 30th 2002  
From The Economist print edition

### An hour's sleep in the middle of the day can work wonders

FINALLY, vindication for power nappers. Far from being lazy louts, siesta-takers are actually doing their bit for the firm. According to Sara Mednick and her colleagues at Harvard, just 60 minutes of shut-eye in the middle of the day can make you perform like the fresh daisy you were first thing in the morning. But it has to be *bona fide* sleep; a mere rest, they found, has no effect.

Dr Mednick, whose results have just been published in *Nature Neuroscience*, wanted to know what effect power napping would have on people's visual perception. She asked 30 student volunteers to come into her laboratory. Four times on the same day, at 9am, noon, 4pm and 7pm, they were required to stare at a computer screen for an hour. Their task was to pick out a vertical or horizontal bar from a striped background—an established test of visual perceptiveness. The more quickly they picked out the bar, the more acute their perception.

All the volunteers had slept well in the days before the test, and had been warned off alcohol. During the test day, nicotine addicts were allowed to indulge their habits, but everyone had to remain uncaffeinated. Despite this cossetting, the performance of the ten volunteers who went straight through the day without a nap deteriorated rapidly. Their best scores were first thing in the morning, and it was downhill from there on. By the last session, they

were taking 52% longer, on average, to identify the orientation of the bar than they had in the first.

However, another ten of the volunteers were given the opportunity to nap at 2pm for 30 minutes, while the remaining ten were allowed a 60-minute snooze. The short nappers did not get any worse in their afternoon test sessions. The long nappers actually got better—they performed just as well as they had first thing.

To test whether a rest, rather than a nap, would do the trick, nine more volunteers were asked in. But to no avail: their abilities declined with each session. Nor did motivation seem to be a factor. Yet another set of volunteers, after a poor showing in the second session, was told they had not done very well, but that they could earn a further \$25 if they could do as well in the afternoon as they had that morning. The poor students' eyes lit up, according to Dr Mednick, but not one, alas, was able to stop the decay.

The upshot is another piece of evidence that humans, like many mammals which have evolved in tropical climes, are adapted not to go out in the mid-day sun. They are, rather, crepuscular—that is, they are most active in the morning and the evening. The protestant work-ethic that drives those now living in colder climates to work throughout the day may actually be counter-productive. At least, that is what you should tell your boss when asking for a couch to be installed in the office.