

DON'T TRUST ME, I'M A DOCTOR

FOR THIS YEAR'S IRM ANNUAL LECTURE, RISK EXPERT PROFESSOR GERD GIGERENZER – FAMOUS FOR HIS WORK ON THE NATURE OF RISK AND UNCERTAINTY – TURNED HIS ATTENTION TO THE MEDICAL INDUSTRY

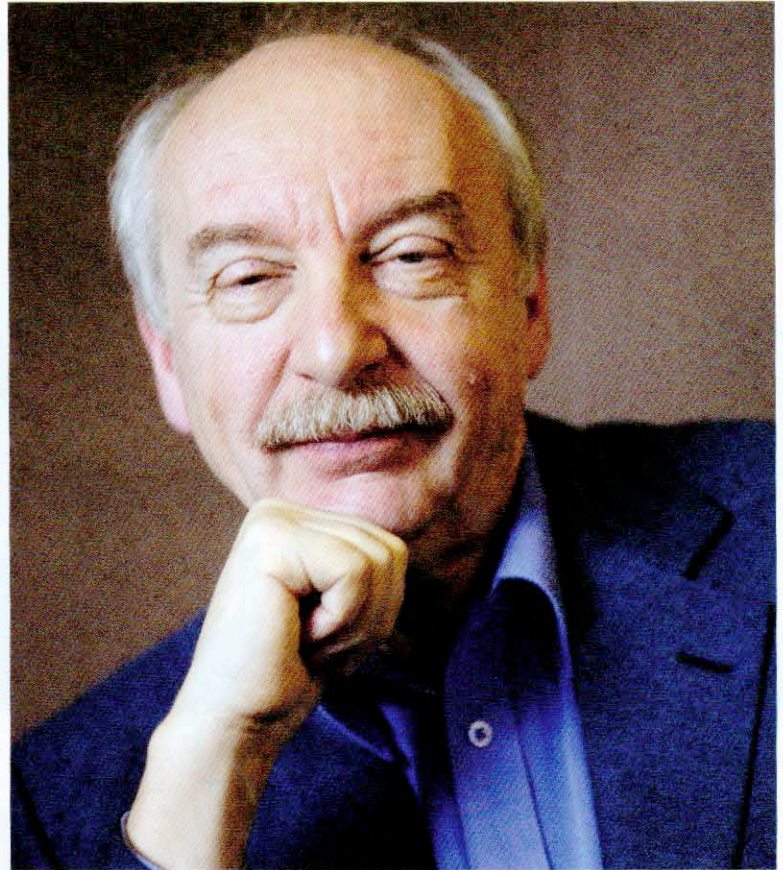
IRM was lucky enough to secure renowned risk psychologist Professor Gerd Gigerenzer for this year's Annual Lecture on 2 December. Prof Gigerenzer is director of the Centre for Adaptive Behaviour and Cognition at Max Planck Institute for Human Development, and is the author of *Risk Savvy*, which was published this Spring.

Risk Savvy blows holes in the way financial institutions, politicians and the press mangle the findings of risk research to come up with the wrong answers. His IRM Annual Lecture, 'Don't trust me, I'm a doctor' – delivered to a packed hall of members and guests in the Willis Building, central London – did the same for the medical profession.

Statistics

Prof Gigerenzer analysed how defensive medicine, conflicts of interest and – crucially – the failure of doctors to understand medical statistics in their own field leads to overdiagnoses, lead-time bias and a confusion of survival rates with mortality rates by both doctors and patients.

He argues that the reasons health practitioners don't understand 'their own' statistics is a combination of not being taught how to interpret them, biased reporting published unchallenged, and a widespread lack of public education. This leaves doctors susceptible to the claims of pharmaceutical companies and is a direct cause of inflated medical bills and costs.



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Medical case

Prof Gigerenzer made a persuasive case for how medical costs can be reduced – and misinterpretation removed – by teaching doctors to understand statistics. This includes teaching them how to translate conditional probabilities into natural frequencies and appreciate the difference between relative and absolute statistics. In the meantime, his simple rule for both doctors and patients is: 'Always ask for ABSOLUTE statistics.'

The IRM's thanks go to Prof Gigerenzer for a fascinating (if disturbing) presentation, and to Willis Group for its generous and continued support of IRM's Annual Lecture programme.

Prof Gigerenzer's presentation is available at:
www.theirm.org/events/annual-lecture ■