

WMU Mathematics Professor Condemns CPSC and Gillibrand in Compelling Letter

The following letter was written in regards to the CPSC Magnet Ban Rulemaking, and was addressed to CPSC Commissioners, Senator Brown, and Senator Gillibrand.

KALAMAZOO, MI, US, July 25, 2013
/EINPresswire.com/ -- Dear
Commissioners and Senators Brown
and Gillibrand,

I am a professor of mathematics and I am against the ban on rare-earth [magnet spheres](#) as proposed by the U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission. Instead of an outright ban, we should have legislation which restricts sale of magnet spheres to adults. When a child is injured by swallowing magnet spheres, we should punish the individual who allowed the child to access them.



In general, a rare-earth magnet sphere kit, sold as "Buckyballs", "Nanodots", "Neocube", or "Zen



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David Richter

Magnets", appeals to the aesthetic senses and mental habits of technical professionals (i.e. nerds) like me. My specialty is discrete geometry, which is a theory involving points, lines, polyhedra, and other geometric objects in Euclidean spaces. The primary applications of discrete geometry are in structural engineering, molecular chemistry, and computer graphics. A magnet sphere kit offers a unique way to study some fundamental ideas of 3-dimensional discrete geometry. For example, with some instruction and patience, one may make models of the Platonic solids. As soon as one understands the principles of building these shapes, it is not hard to imagine a world

of variations.

Given the specialized nature of these ideas, it is easy to understand why an “average person” would assume that magnet spheres serve no purpose. Indeed, a lot of people don’t ever build anything with their magnet spheres. A standard kit of 216 magnet spheres may easily serve as a stress-relief ball and, without instruction, it not easy to imagine what one can build with them. However, aside from objects in discrete geometry, one can build an amazing variety of things, all very elegant and pretty. The [Zen Magnets gallery](#), for instance, is extremely impressive. One can also find countless examples on YouTube. If you haven’t seen it, you should look for the Buckyballs motor.

There are many products which are both dangerous and legally obtainable in the United States. Firearms come to mind immediately. These products are marketed towards adults and many children are harmed by them on a daily basis. When a child is injured by a firearm, an adult is almost always held accountable. Magnet spheres have not been in the public domain for as long, so it is natural that we face some confusion in how to deal with the hazards they present.

Magnet spheres are different from firearms because they can cause an injury with no obvious visible signs, i.e. pinching the intestine. We humans have a fragile and complicated system for digesting food. I would suspect that most Americans could not outline the process of digestion beyond the obvious things that we see on a regular basis. How many people know the locations of the gall bladder, the pancreas, the duodenum, the small intestine, the lower intestine, etc? How many people can explain the functions of these organs? Moreover, nobody really knows how magnets work. I would guess that most people don’t have a sense that magnetic fields penetrate flesh but not steel. I’m sad to say it, but our reaction to magnet spheres may be a by-product of our failure to educate the public about basic biology, physics, and even geometry. In any case, our reaction so far has been fearful panic rather than informed deliberation.

A successful recall on magnet sphere kits would prevent responsible US citizens from having access to this educational product and artistic medium. However, it’s difficult to imagine how a recall would work. Many kits have already been purchased anonymously with cash at museum or office gift stores. Does the [CPSC](#) plan to use law enforcement to confiscate contraband magnet sphere kits? How could the CPSC convince the police to take this seriously? I hope that the commissioners do not believe that the same people who are negligent enough to let small children play with magnet spheres would willfully return their kits to the stores where they bought them.

A successful ban and a recall on magnet sphere kits would prevent responsible US citizens who do not have children or regular contact with children from having access to this educational product and artistic medium. However, I am a parent. I have two daughters, ages 3 and 4. They might be aware that I keep a set of magnet spheres in my office, but we have not talked about it. Since I keep these magnets locked away in my office, my girls don’t have a chance to play with them. The packaging states clearly that they are not intended for children. The CPSC complaint

states that such clear warnings are ineffective. (Although the statistics don't show this.) Thus, the attempt to ban this product reflects not only our general ignorance of biology, physics, and geometry, but, apparently, our inability to read.

This leads to perhaps the most distressing problem with this proposed ban and recall: It sets a dangerous precedent. As far as I know, no product has ever been recalled in spite of the fact that it is perfectly safe when clear warnings are issued and obeyed. Rarely has the manufacturer or the distributor of a product been held accountable when someone is injured through misuse. If this ban and recall are successful, nothing will stop the CPSC from making similar actions in the future. Since the variety of circumstances when this could arise is so vast, (think of firearms, automobiles, electrical outlets, knives, matches, and so on), we will have to accept increasingly arbitrary actions by the CPSC. Does the CPSC really want to dilute its potency in protecting consumers from genuinely dangerous products?

Yours sincerely,
David Richter

[Views do not represent Western Michigan University]

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