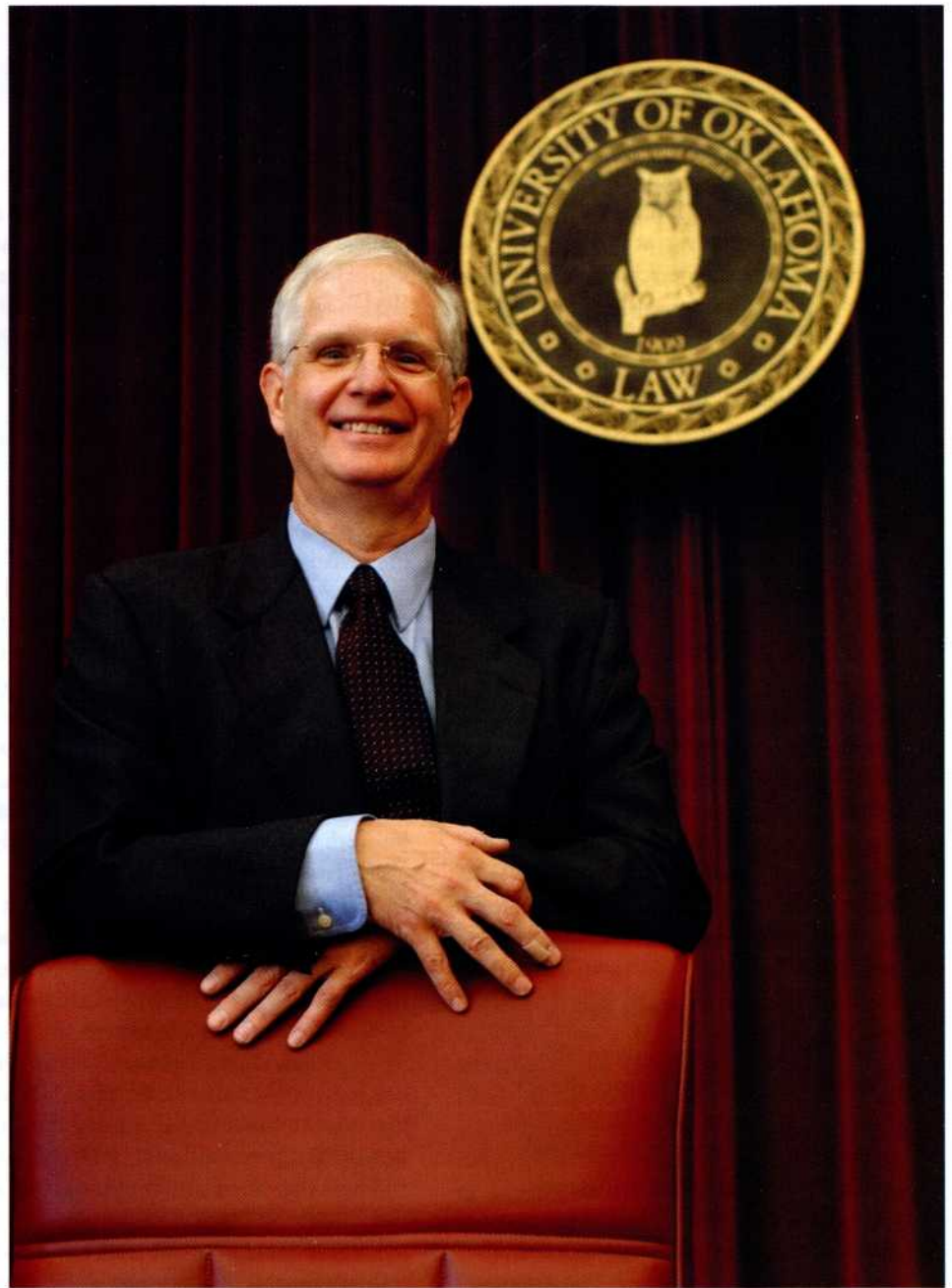




How safe are the products you buy?
OU graduate Hal Stratton is dedicated to pursuing that question and disseminating the answer.



ALWAYS ON THE

Hal Stratton is working to keep each and every one of us just a little bit safer.

A native Oklahoman and two-time University of Oklahoma graduate, Stratton was appointed last year by President George W. Bush as chairman of the U. S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, the independent federal agency charged with protecting the public from unreasonable risks of serious injury or death from thousands of consumer products.

Born in Muskogee and raised in Oklahoma City, Stratton is no stranger to public service, although he admits it was not the career he contemplated as an undergraduate majoring in geology at OU in the early 1970s. "I always figured I'd be a lawyer. Geology and law seemed to be a good combination, especially in Oklahoma and the West, where I wanted to practice," he says.

He earned his law degree at OU and, before launching his legal career, carefully researched all of the western states, finally settling on New Mexico.

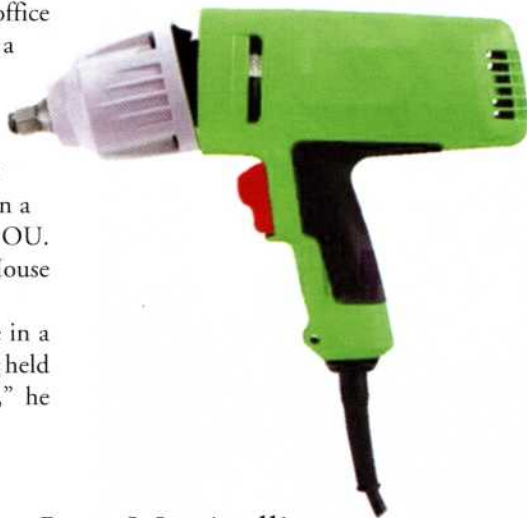
In 1978, when Stratton was 27, a fellow attorney in his Albuquerque office building—who happened to be a member of the state legislature—suggested that he run for public office. "I never had political aspirations. I thought it might be fun just to run," says Stratton, who has been a staunch Republican since his days at OU. He decided to run for a seat in the House of Representatives.

"I inadvertently bought a house in a district that the Democrats had long held but the Republicans had targeted," he

recalls. "I ran against an incumbent who was the majority whip and, if he won, would become the House leader. I knocked on doors every day of the campaign and won the election with 57 or 58 percent of the vote."

After eight years in the House, he was ready for a new challenge. "I wanted to get out of the legislature gracefully, but it seemed unseemly at that young age to just quit the cause. Republicans thought that 1986 might be their year in the state," he explains. "I had chaired the House Judiciary Committee for two years—40 percent of the legislation came through that committee—which gave me a chance to show what I could do. And I had built a reputation for fairness. [The judiciary chairmanship] also gave me another piece of the puzzle to be able to move on to other things."

The first was the job of New Mexico's attorney general. "I checked with all the Republican gubernatorial candidates and Senator Pete Domenici (R-N.M.). They were supportive of my candidacy," he says. "I won that election by 690 votes



By Debra Levy Martinelli

Photos by Robert Taylor

SAFE SIDE

and became the first Republican attorney general elected in the state since 1928."

He left state government after completing his term as attorney general because the New Mexico Constitution prohibited him from seeking any other statewide elective office except lieutenant governor—a post that did not interest him. He and a partner started a private law practice in Albuquerque, emphasizing commercial and complex litigation and oil and gas law.

By the end of 2001, Stratton had left the law firm but continued to represent clients on such diverse matters as Native American and technology issues. One of his clients had assumed an advocacy position in the Microsoft antitrust case. "That case got me back into the mix," he says.

When friends encouraged him to seek a position in the Bush administration, he applied for a post at the Department of the Interior. The job went to someone else but, Stratton says, White House staffers, including the president's chief political adviser, Carl Rove, got to know him and found another post for which they thought he would be well-suited: chairman of the Consumer Product Safety Commission.

Although the CPSC, with an annual budget of \$56 million and a staff of less than 500, is one of the smallest federal agencies, its influence is far-reaching. Through data collection and research, the commission investigates the causes of deaths and injuries from such consumer products as toys, power tools, cigarette lighters and household chemicals that pose risks of fire, electrical, chemical or mechanical hazard or that can injure children. It creates safety performance standards, issues product recalls—usually with the cooperation of the manufacturer—and has the authority to impose fines and penalties.

The commission does not have jurisdiction over automobiles, boats, airplanes, alcohol, tobacco, firearms, food, drugs, cosmetics, pesticides or medical devices. However, Stratton says there is enough latitude in classifying products used in and around the home or in sports, recreation and schools—the test for whether a

product is regulated by the CPSC or another regulatory agency—to allow previous commissions to include under the CPSC umbrella such products as escalators and building sprinkler systems.

Reports of potentially hazardous products are made by just about anyone, from the manufacturer to an individual. “We don’t care who reports it,” Stratton says. “Our purpose in establishing regulations and having products recalled is solely to make products safer for the consumer.”

On any given day, the CPSC posts announcements of recalls on its Web site (www.cpsc.gov), which also includes a searchable database of recalls by date, product type or product description. Much of the information on the Web site is available in both English and Spanish. Recent recalls posted on the site include a riding lawn mower, rear projection television, Easter plush toy stuffed with small beads, electric blanket, slow cooker, lawn sprinkler and cordless drill.



“We don’t believe that most companies are intentionally trying to harm anyone. That wouldn’t be good business,” Stratton says. “And the CPSC isn’t out to penalize or punish as its primary function. Our work is geared toward getting bad products off the market.”

Although product recalls are almost

always voluntary—Stratton says that during calendar year 2002, 100 percent of the recalls were cooperative or voluntary—manufacturers sometimes resist. In those cases, the matter is conducted in much the same way as a hearing in a civil lawsuit and is heard by an administrative law judge. He emphasized that distributors, retailers and importers, in addition to manufacturers, also are subject to CPSC regulations and product recalls.

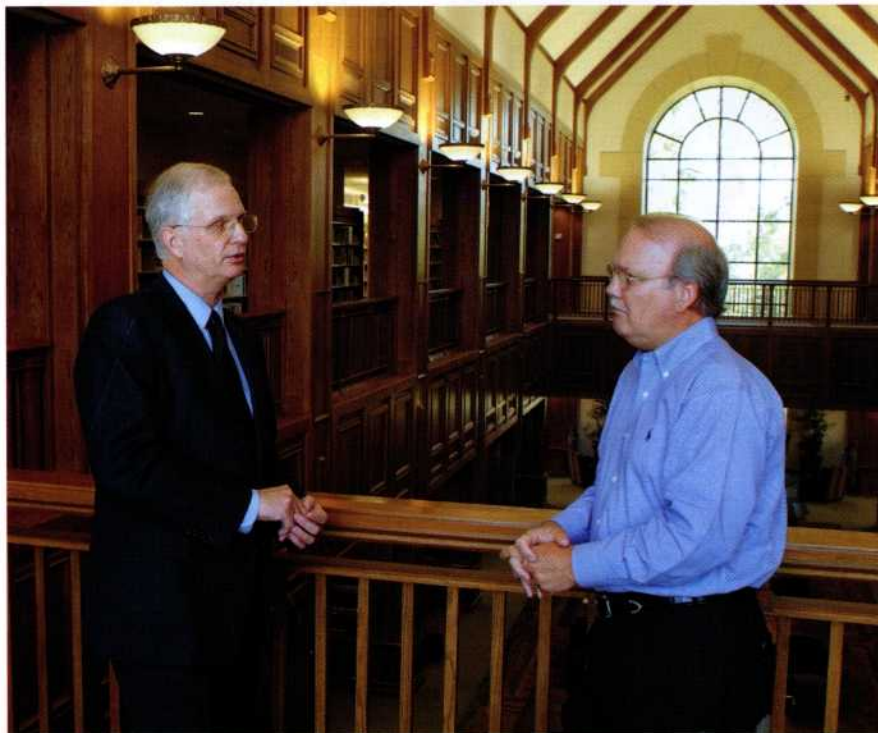
“We look to the manufacturer first, unless there’s a circumstance that indicates the distributor or retailer did something they shouldn’t have done,” he explains. “For example, WalMart displayed exercise equipment for customers to try out. But people were getting hurt and breaking bones. Neither the manufacturer nor WalMart notified the CPSC in a timely manner.” The result: WalMart was slapped with a \$750,000 penalty.

The commission has authority to assess penalties of up to \$1.65 million for any one product. But legislation before Congress would increase that limit to \$20 million. “WalMart hired eight lawyers to oppose a \$1.5 million penalty,” Stratton says. “Imagine what companies would have to do to oppose a \$20 million penalty.”

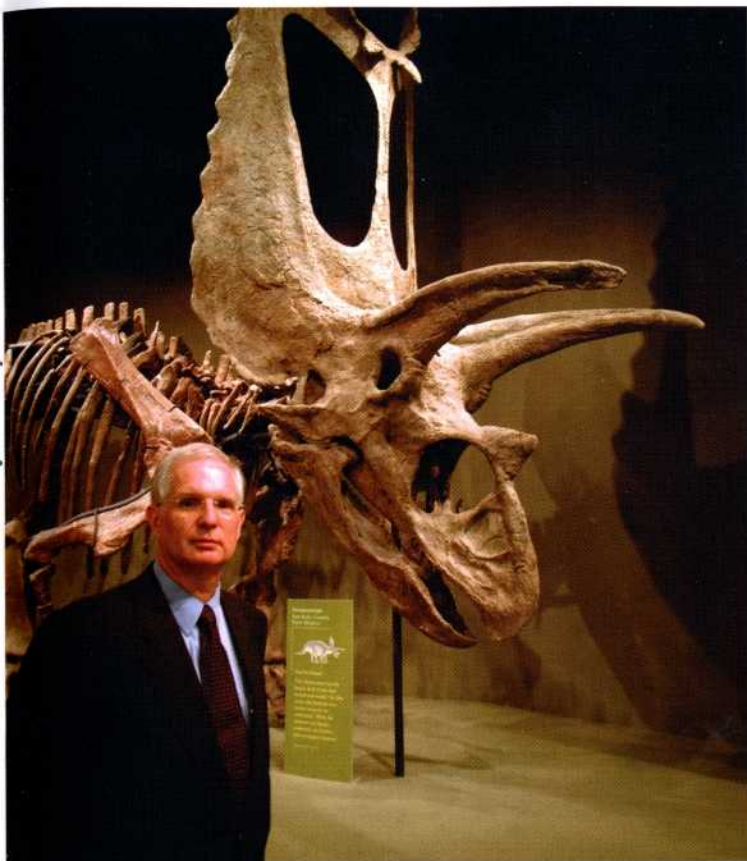
Even when a product is voluntarily recalled, some units invariably remain in the public domain. Through a program called Recall Roundup, the CPSC reminds consumers about previous recalls of products that are still in circulation—in retail outlets, thrift shops and homes.

“Seventeen percent of products that have been recalled are still out there; they’ve been sold and returned or people just want to keep them,” he says. “Products that are handed down from generation to generation, such as hope chests and baby cribs, are the subject of Recall Roundups. The earlier chests had no mechanism that would prevent a child from locking himself inside. Some baby cribs have posts that are too high, and kids have hanged themselves on them, or there’s a wide gap between the mattress and the side of the crib, where kids can fall through.”

In the fall of each year, the CPSC conducts a special Toy Roundup, reminding consumers about the top 10 or so toys that have been recalled.



Assistant Dean David Poarch, right, gave Hal Stratton, left, a guided tour of Andrew W. Coats Hall, the magnificent new addition to the OU Law Center on Timberdell Road. As a member of the OU Law Class of 1976, Stratton was among the last students to attend classes in Monnet Hall, the original law building—the “Law Barn”—on Parrington Oval.



OU Geology graduate Hal Stratton visited Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History's pentaceratops exhibit. As a New Mexico state legislator, Stratton tried unsuccessfully to have pentaceratops named the state dinosaur, losing out to ceolophys, but still would cast his vote for the majestic fellow.

Almost every month, Stratton himself appears in a video news release that is sent via satellite to TV stations across the country in English and Spanish. Topics include poison prevention, swimming pool safety, firework safety and carbon monoxide poisoning. Each October, in anticipation of Halloween, the CPSC distributes a video on such dangerous holiday fare as costumes, candles and props.

"The goal is to get people thinking about safety," Stratton explains.

"But I always tell them, 'I'm just passing through; you're the ones who will carry on the mission,'" he says.

To make the commission more visible, Stratton travels the country, educating business leaders, government officials and consumers about the CPSC's mission and why it is important to all Americans. To make the commission more accessible, he opened hearings to include anyone who wishes to participate.

"It used to be that the involved parties could submit written comments to the commission but couldn't testify at the commission hearing," he explains. "Now, anyone, including private citizens, can file a written comment before the hearing and then testify."

To reach out to underserved communities,

"Our purpose in establishing regulations and having products recalled is solely to make products safer for the consumer."

he personally visits those populations to hear their concerns. One of the purposes of a recent trip to Alaska, in addition to addressing the annual meeting of the National State Fire Marshals Association, was to investigate the high rate of All-Terrain Vehicle deaths among Eskimos. A visit to Oklahoma yielded a meeting with Chad Smith, the principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, of which Stratton is an enrolled member.

Product safety, especially as it relates to children, is always on Stratton's mind. A devoted husband and father, Stratton spends as much time as possible with Theresa, his wife of 13 years, and daughters, 8-year-old Alexandra and 4-year-old Claire.

"Having young children of my own has given me an even greater appreciation of the possible danger of consumer products," he says. When he is not in the office or on the road spreading the word about the CPSC, he helps coach Alexandra's soccer, baseball and basketball teams. He plans to eventually take the whole family—"the girls," he calls them—to China where the Strattons adopted Claire in 2000.

An accomplished "part classical, part Chet Atkins" finger-style guitarist and owner of 25 guitars, Stratton learned the instrument as a child. "Between the ages of 14 and 22, I gave guitar lessons in Oklahoma City," he recalls. "It was the only real job I ever had before becoming a lawyer. I earned \$7 an hour, which in the 1960s was a pretty good gig."

Stratton thinks the CPSC chairmanship is a pretty good gig, too. "It's a privilege and honor to serve," he says.

