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LETTERS

edited by Jennifer Sills

Less-Toxic Cigarette Use May Backfire

IN THE NEWS OF THE WEEK STORY BY J. COUZIN-FRANKEL AND R. KOENIG ("EXPANDED U.S. DRUG agency to control tobacco," 19 June, p. 1497), Gregory Connolly points out that promoting less-toxic cigarettes has not been shown to reduce tobacco-related death and disease. In fact, promoting the use of cigarettes containing lower levels of nicotine may even increase tobacco-related death and disease.

Of the excess deaths caused by smoking, about 29% have been caused by heart disease and stroke, about 16% by lung cancer, and the rest mostly by assorted other kinds of cancer (1). Many people think of lung cancer as the chief culprit because lung cancer is a relatively rare disease in the absence of smoking, whereas heart disease is quite common. Nonsmokers get lung cancer at about 1/40th the rate of smokers (2), whereas heart disease and stroke are major causes of death in both smokers and nonsmokers (1).

Studies have shown that nicotine addicts smoke until they have absorbed enough nicotine to satisfy their craving (3). This means that they will smoke more cigarettes if the cigarettes contain lower concentrations of nicotine. This, in turn, means that they will be subjected to more of the "tars" (the cancer-causing ingredients of the smoke) in their attempts to get their usual dosage of nicotine (the ingredient responsible for heart disease and stroke). In the end, smokers of low-nicotine cigarettes will remain at the same risk for heart disease and stroke but increase their chances of developing cancer.

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NIH Needs a Makeover

NIH GRANTS ARE COVETED AND LAUDED POSSESSIONS among scientists. They are considered a mark of accomplishment or promise, offered for scientific merit and devoid of politics. Unfortunately, the system that bestows the grants has become tangled and inefficient.

The lack of quality reviewers is a major issue. The guidelines for reviewer selection on the NIH Web site are vague at best (1). We need individuals who are experts in their fields, but there are no specific guidelines as to what defines "expert." These flimsy criteria made it easy to increase the number of reviewers to an astonishing 30,000 (2) in the wake of the stimulus grant deluge, but do not ensure that the reviewers are of high quality. The

Center for Scientific Review is desperate to recruit reviewers and is drafting individuals who have poor records of NIH grant awards or weak publishing histories. How can those individuals be trusted to review grants?

Even without the unprecedented number of grants resulting from the stimulus, it is difficult to recruit and retain adequate numbers of qualified reviewers. (Three to four reviewers are solicited to critique each grant.) Study section reviews are still conducted largely on-site, requiring considerable time investments from reviewing scientists. The NIH should make better use of modern telecommunications technology; the grant discussions could easily be conducted via video/teleconference, freeing up not only time but copious amounts of money spent on travel and lodging.

The newly introduced guidelines for reviewing grant applications also pose a challenge to NIH. Assigned reviewers now summarize the strengths and weaknesses on a grant in "bullet forms," which allow for numerical scores but not detailed comments. A grant is scored in five categories (significance, investigators, innovation, approach, and environment), but a final score on overall merit determines the percentile score for funding determination. It is not yet clear whether individual scores have any bearing on the overall score. Moreover, without detailed comments from the reviewers, an applicant does not have much feedback on how to revise a grant for resubmission. The new system is intended to improve the review process, but requires close monitoring to determine whether it is serving the purpose.

It is time to appoint a strong leader at NIH who has the understanding of a lifetime researcher and the authority to revolutionize the institution. It is imperative that the infrastructure be strengthened immediately to advance biomedical research pursuits. S. K. DEY

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Keeping Infection at Arm's Length

IN THEIR REPORT "TOPOGRAPHICAL AND TEMPORAL diversity of the human skin microbiome" (29 May, p. 1190), E. A. Grice *et al.* found that the richest area (in ecological terms) appeared to be the volar forearm, and the antecubital fossa topped the diversity list. This is the exact site physicians use to perform venepuncture, and the results should inform future disinfectant protocol.

Disinfection is often inefficient. When a swabbed venepuncture site is punctured before the antiseptic agent dries (1), the bactericidal effect is compromised. In some cases, official guidelines go so far as to consider cleansing the skin optional (2).



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Ineffective disinfection has substantial consequences. Blood culture contamination after venepuncture is relatively common and may lead to false positive cultures and unnecessary antibiotic use and hospital stays (3). Furthermore, bacteria can be introduced in the bloodstream, causing local or systemic infection. Among the bacteria detected in this body region by Grice *et al.* were the *Staphylococcus aureus* species and phyla hosting pathogens that are responsible for the most common causes of bloodstream infection and sepsis (4).

The findings in this report provide grounds for more meticulous disinfection, at least until trials offer us more definitive evidence.

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Make Way for Robot Scientists

IN THEIR 19 JUNE LETTER (“MACHINES FALL short of revolutionary science,” p. 1515), P. W. Anderson and E. Abrahams, commenting on our work on the automation of science, state that we are “seriously mistaken about the nature of the scientific enterprise.” Their argument seems to be based on two premises: (i) There are two types of science, normal and revolutionary, and normal science “does not contribute very much to the advancement of knowledge.” This view dismisses as unimportant the vast bulk of science, and must surely be wrong. (ii) Whereas normal science may be automated, revolutionary science never will be, as there is no possible “mechanism.” It is certainly true that revolutionary science cannot currently be automated, and in our Report

(“The automation of science,” 3 April, p. 85) we described the automatically generated science as “modest...but not trivial.” Nevertheless, the inability of some critics to imagine a mechanism does not eliminate the possibility that one exists.

Indeed, the mechanism we propose is the one that has been successfully applied to chess: There is a continuum in player skill, and computers slowly improved with advances in computer hardware and software until they now play at world championship level. We argue that there is a similar continuum in the ability to do science, from what robot scientists can do today, through what most human scientists can achieve, up to the level of a Darwin or Newton.

LIFE IN SCIENCE

Creationists Made Me Do It

I was always a mediocre student, especially in high school. I never really knew what I wanted to do, and nothing seemed to excite me. This changed in my senior year, when a creationist visited my biology class.

On that fateful day, all the science students were herded into the school auditorium, where we listened to a long and richly illustrated lecture describing literal creationism. We were informed that in an effort to “balance” our education, we would soon hear an equally long lecture on evolution. This, like many things I heard that day, turned out to be false. The evolution lecture never materialized. Remarkably, I graduated from senior biology having learned only about creationism.

School had finally gotten my full attention. I wanted to know what we were missing, and why. For the first time in my life, I willingly (eagerly even) picked up my textbook and studiously read it. With growing interest, I realized that evolution made an awful lot of sense, and that I was being hoodwinked by my biology class.

It’s hard to overestimate the appeal of rebelling against the system to a teenaged boy, and that day marked the beginning of my path to a career in evolutionary biology. We learned other things in science class that year, too—for example, that all actions have an opposite reaction. For at least one sulky teenager in the small town of Owen Sound, Ontario, it took a creationist to make him into an evolutionary biologist.

EDITOR’S NOTE

This is an occasional feature highlighting some of the day-to-day humorous realities that face our readers. Can you top this? Submit your best stories at www.submit2science.org.

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The Physics Nobel Laureate Frank Wilczek has said that the best chess player in the world is “non-human” and that this may well be true for the best physicist in 100 years time (1). Finally, Anderson and Abrahams ignore the possibility of machines and humans working together to do revolutionary science that neither could do alone.

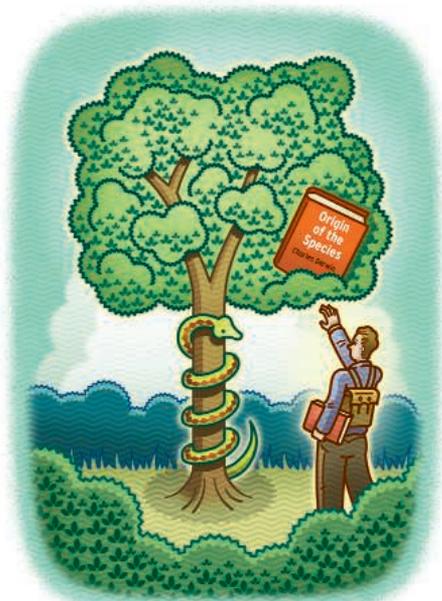
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Looking to Bacteria for Clues

IN HIS NEWS FOCUS STORY "ON THE ORIGIN of sexual reproduction" (5 June, p. 1254), C. Zimmer highlights the importance of the phylogenetic perspective championed by John Logsdon, but by considering only eukaryotes he overlooks an important bacterial clue to the evolution-of-sex puzzle.

Until recently, bacteria were thought to be sexual; they have well-characterized processes that cause recombination of chromosomal alleles, and these parasexual processes were assumed to have evolved for recombination in the same way as meiotic sex in eukaryotes. However, a more critical analysis of the genes responsible for the parasexual processes suggests that they did not evolve for sex after all. Instead, the chromosomal recombination they cause appears to arise as unselected effects of related processes, the evolutionary functions of which are well established (1).

The fact that bacteria lack genes evolved for recombination indicates that meiotic sex

must have evolved in eukaryotes to solve a problem that bacteria don't have. Bacteria apparently get whatever recombination they need by accident—why do eukaryotes need so much more?

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CORRECTIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

Letters: "Organics: Evidence of health benefits is lacking" by K. Clancy *et al.* (7 August, p. 676). The title should have been "Organics: Evidence of nutritional superiority is weak."

Policy Forum: "The illusive gold standard in genetic ancestry testing" by S. S.-J. Lee *et al.* (3 July, p. 38). When data were extracted for indexing, the first author's name was incorrectly parsed; her surname is Lee.

News Focus: "The brain collector" by G. Miller (26 June, p. 1634). Henry Molaison died on 2 December, not 8 December, 2008. Also, the credit for the photo of Jacopo Annese should be "Kevin Donley."

Reports: "IL-21 is required to control chronic viral infection" by H. Elsaesser *et al.* (19 June, p. 1569; published online 7 May). The date of receipt was 22 October 2008, not the later date in the original *Science Express* publication. The date has been corrected both online and in print.

News Focus: "Obama moves to revitalize Chesapeake Bay restoration" by E. Stokstad (29 May, p. 1138). The credit for the image on page 1139 should be "Adapted from ECO-CHECK.ORG" (not ECO-CHECK.COM). The link has been corrected online.

Reports: "Del-1, an endogenous leukocyte-endothelial adhesion inhibitor, limits inflammatory cell recruitment" by E. Y. Choi *et al.* (14 November 2008, p. 1101). The following sentence should be added to the acknowledgments in reference 26: H.F.L. was supported by the German Academy of Sciences (Leopoldina).

Letters to the Editor

Letters (~300 words) discuss material published in *Science* in the previous 3 months or issues of general interest. They can be submitted through the Web (www.submit2science.org) or by regular mail (1200 New York Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20005, USA). Letters are not acknowledged upon receipt, nor are authors generally consulted before publication. Whether published in full or in part, letters are subject to editing for clarity and space.

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