

to the editor

Ethics of lobotomies

I read with interest the article, "A clockwork orange in a California prison" (SN: 3/11/72, p. 174). Throughout this paper, the opinion of a Dr. Breggin, a psychiatrist who is against lobotomies was emphasized.

The gross, nonspecific techniques of lobotomies done years ago may certainly be open to criticism. However, the newer, exact stereotaxic lesions do obtain excellent results in certain select cases in which all other modes of treatment have been tried and have failed.

The article described a potpourri of techniques including the old lobotomies, the work done by Dr. Delgado with electrostimulation, and others. None of the techniques are designed to alter personality but merely to allow the person to behave as he did in the past before he was ill. The fear of dramatic "technologic totalitarianism" is something Dr. Breggin claims to fear, but in none of the cases he mentions can he show that the patient has come under the control of a mind manipulator, so to speak.

It may be all right for the Russians to outlaw psychosurgery, if this is really a fact, but should we outlaw all automobiles because many people have been killed due to careless driving? Should we outlaw all pain-killing narcotics because some people abuse them?

Today's psychosurgery techniques do less damage than shock treatment which affects the entire brain. And rather than dulling the intellect and personality, many patients, including a number on whom I have operated, show a higher I.Q. post surgery than they did before, because their intelligence is not suppressed by anxiety.

We should indeed consider the quality of life. If psychic pain is so severe that a person cannot carry on normal activities and perhaps, ultimately, destroys himself, should we not offer relief? There are cases when medicines and psychotherapy do not work.

Dr. Breggin is evidently an expert in gaining the attention of the mass media, since each story against lobotomies is attributed to him. He has a right to his opinion.

Arthur Winter, M.D.
Neurological Surgeon
East Orange, N.J.

If the lopsided sensational article by Robert J. Trotter entitled "A clockwork orange in a California prison" is science reporting we had better revive some of the long defunct Sunday supplements of yellow journalism.

As a long time subscriber I hope you will spare us this kind of biased emotional propaganda in the future.

Norman Levinson, Sc.D.
Cambridge, Mass.

I admire very much Mr. Trotter's persistence in seeking to get both sides of a story in an attempt for an objective article. His account was well written and interesting.

As for Dr. Breggin, I would agree that there is a need for caution in the field of psychosurgery. I also understand his desire to attract attention to his cause by presenting melodramatic points of view. However I do feel that he could achieve more by less sweeping statements, the avoidance of libel, and adherence to accuracy.

Martin S. Bander
Director, News and Public Affairs
Massachusetts General Hospital
Boston, Mass.

Placing José M. R. Delgado and B. F. Skinner in a category with those performing prefrontal lobotomy is a blunder. Prison inmates retain their full rights as long as they are allowed to select medical and conditioning treatments of their own free will. There must be no coercion.

The present state of the art of prefrontal lobotomy makes it a profitless and extreme measure. Caution is advised, however, against propelling the pendulum too far in the other extreme direction of blackballing beneficial conditioning methods.

J. T. Kessler
Hollywood, Calif.

Roots of civilization

We thoroughly enjoyed the article "Tracing the roots of civilization" (SN: 2/19/72, p. 124). Mr. Trotter did a fine job.

Marcus H. Baldwin
Prescott, Ariz.

I protest your publication of the sexist remark attributed to Hallam L. Movius Jr., concerning Rosenfeld: "She is a silly little fool—perfectly inexcusable. She ought to have her pants taken down, be turned over and spanked for not doing her homework."

Can you envision yourself publishing a similar remark about a man? You owe Rosenfeld and your readers an apology.

G. Harman
Department of Philosophy
Princeton University
Princeton, N.J.

Mr. Marshack's view that "extreme viewpoints tend to stifle discussion" is well proven by Movius.

S. G. Curry
Wood Junior College
Mathison, Miss.

(The Movius remark has caused quite a stir on both sides of the Atlantic. Our inclusion of it was intended merely to emphasize the controversial nature of Marshack's work.—Ed.)

Laser safety

There are no standards of laser safety as yet, but the article by Louise A. Purrett (SN: 2/5/72, p. 94) furnished an excellent review of the current planning which is going on both by the Bureau of Radiological Health to develop such

programs, and by American National Standards Institute, which should be given proper recognition for its important program.

As regards the passage of laser beams through the skin into viscera, this refers only to animal skin. Even with so-called high power output, this does not occur in a man with serious damage.

In regard to my own studies, it would have been well to mention also that even more important than my own studies and experiments on the arm as relates essentially to chronic exposure is the fact that the studies on hundreds of patients who have been treated during the last 10 years with very high output laser systems have shown no evidence of any dangerous reactions.

Leon Goldman, M.D.
Director, Laser Laboratory
Children's Hospital Research Foundation
Cincinnati, Ohio

A bad week?

Your article "Last week was a bad week for the narcs" (SN: 2/19/72, p. 117) made it a bad week for SCIENCE NEWS I would say. There is quite enough of the feeling in the country that "it's us against the Government and 'their' agents," (largely, I suspect, because of reporting like the article I'm writing about) without implying that the "narcs" (agents of the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, I presume) have any vested interest in what substances are defined as illegal or what the penalty for the crime is. Let me hasten to add, however, that, in general, I like and thoroughly appreciate SCIENCE NEWS.

C. Ronald Seeger
Associate Professor of
Geology and Geophysics
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Ky.

Your article about marijuana referred to "moderate use of the drug by normal adults." Such limiting phraseology is all too common and tends further to obscure one vital consideration which is being generally neglected in the controversy over legalization of the drug: the potential effect on our youth population.

There can hardly be any doubt that legalization, or any significant breach of existing legal barriers, would result in the availability of this euphoric drug to the juvenile world on an enormously expanded scale. Adolescence is at best a trying (and character-building) time of life. This would be a form of social pollution which could produce what would come to be known as "the pothead generation," and in which the society itself might easily founder. There is no one today who can say with any real assurance that this could not or would not happen.

F. P. McCormack
Monte Vista, Calif.