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Incorporating Science News Letter

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COVER: When proton meets proton at the energies characteristic of the giant accelerator at the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, a lot of particles can be created. In this event 26 charged daughter particles are visible. See p. 364. (Photo: FermiLab)

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December 7, 1974

To the Editor

Experiments in animal behavior

I have an argument with animal behaviorists who study animals and then equate their findings with human behavior. Animals can't tell you why they do what they do, so too much depends on researchers' interpretation of animals' behavior.

Admittedly I am no expert being only an amateur scientist, but I would like to use as an example, "A fright in time saves nine," (SN: 11/9/74, p. 301). Had I conducted this experiment, I would have wondered if the monkeys had actually chosen to see the frightening scenes or whether they operated on a trial-and-error basis preferring to see "something" rather than "nothing." Only when they realized that the "something" was always "horror movies" did they figure out which button would turn them off—and then chose to blank out the horror. Interpreting this into human behavior, I might then wonder if perhaps children, raised with the full knowledge of the realities of life, turned into the adults who choose to "blank out" the horrors of life and can then watch—but not see—starvation, murder, muggings, etc. without lifting a finger to help.

Anna Emeigh
Pittsburgh, Pa.

DDT in women's milk

Your recent article on the DDT levels in milk of rural black women (SN: 11/2/74, p. 286) contained an error that should be corrected and some points that should be clarified.

The lower value of the range of DDT concentrations in the black women was 0.059 ppm instead of 0.59, as you reported. It should also be noted that the range of the DDT concentrations in the milk of suburban whites was from 0.015 to 0.133 ppm. The mean concentration in this same population was found to be 0.17 ppm in a study three years ago [Wilson et al., *Am J. Dis Child*, 125, 814-817 (1973)].

We do not plan a clinical study on the effects of DDT on breast-fed infants. We do, however, implore other researchers in the medical field to systematically study infants in this poor rural black population to determine if infants are in fact harmed by the DDT in human milk. Even though we know of no reported cases of breast-fed infants being harmed by the DDT, this population would be logical candidates to look for pesticide-related damage if it exists.

Bruce B. Ferguson
PBR Electronics, Inc.
Athens, Ala.

Don't ax the piano player

I had previously felt that, ignoring considerations of immediate or long-term utility, money spent on esoteric research and development could be justified in terms of "royalties" not paid to such practical scientists(?) as Albert Einstein (for atomic energy), James Clerk Maxwell (for television and radar), Isaac Newton (optics and aeronautics), John von Neumann (economics and computers), Gregor Mendel (genetics), Robert Goddard (communication satellites), Michael Faraday (electric power), Casimir Funk (vitamins), Sadi Carnot (automobile engines). . . .

However, honesty forces me to admit that not every dollar spent on R&D "has any practical application to solving the world food problem, health problems, social problems, etc." It must even be admitted that not all of the scientific work done by the above men was directed toward these worthy ends—Faraday and Goddard, for example, where notorious for "playing with scientific apparatus as if it were meant for children."

So I will respond to the letter of Mr. Daniel Byrne (SN: 10/12/74, p. 227) with a hearty "I'll drink to that!"

Figuratively, of course, bartenders also "ought to do something practical with the intellect God gave them." So we can do without bartenders.

Several minutes of thought leads me to suggest that we can also do without all actors, artists, ballet dancers, car salesmen, fashion models, historians, ice cream vendors, insurance salesmen, jockeys, lawyers, ministers, musicians, museum curators, night club owners, novelists, park directors, pet store owners, philosophers, PLAYBOY bunnies, professional athletes, psychoanalysts, race car drivers, rock singers, sculptors, stock brokers, TV repairmen, undertakers. . . .

I could make a longer list, and they'd none of them be missed, they'd none of them be missed (put operetta composers on the list). . . .

Mike Shupp
Downey, Calif.

Byrne replies

Many people have responded to my letter entitled New Elements as Toys (SN: 10/12/74, p. 227). I recognize the importance of pure research and the benefits mankind may derive for the future.

Unfortunately, the world situation is close to critical, pathetic for many people. If we are to be witness to the future, then we must concentrate total energies upon today's problems.

The future is now.

Daniel Byrne
Plymouth, Mich.

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