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10

## Chemistry

## To conceive or not to conceive

The oral contraceptive without side effects. This, to borrow from Shakespeare, ". . . 'tis a consumation devoutly to be wish'd." Researchers are pursuing many different approaches to the development of a pill without side effects, and if the size of the effort is any measure, a better pill should be right around the corner. A step toward this "consumation-without-conception" has been taken with the isolation of progesterone receptors from the human uterus.

Biochemist Roy G. Smith and team members Carlos A. Iramain, Veasy C. Buttram and Bert W. O'Malley from the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston reported the isolation to the American Chemical Society's recent meeting in Houston. The team obtained and purified the progesterone receptor from homogenates of human uterine tissue. The protein receptor molecule binds natural and synthetic progestins (a group of substances which includes progesterone) and in the natural system prepares the uterine lining for conception.

After more is known about the chemistry of the receptor, it may be possible to achieve contraception without side effects, Smith says. If an agent can be found which blocks the binding of progesterone to the receptor, the uterine lining would be rendered unsuitable for egg implantation. And since only the normal action of progesterone would be blocked without changing hormone levels or adding synthetic hormones, "such a new antifertility agent should not cause any adverse side effects."

## Gypsy moth's super sex attractant

It was reported recently that the sex attractant of the oak leaf roller moth is not manufactured by the female insect at all, but is absorbed from oak leaves (SN: 11/30/74, p. 343). Now, another equally interesting discovery has been made about the sex attractant of the gypsy moth. Both findings have potential economic importance, since sex attractants are being developed as natural insecticides.

Agricultural chemist Shingo Marumo of Gayoya University in Japan and four other researchers report in the Dec. 11 Journal of the American Chemical Society that the sex attractant of the gypsy moth comes in two forms and that one is 1,000 times more "attractive" than the other. Like many other molecules, disparlure (the attractant) occurs in two stereoisomeric forms in nature. This means there are two forms of the compound with identical physical properties but which are mirror images of each other structurally. The team reports that the (+) form of disparlure attracts male gypsy moths at concentrations as low as one part per million, while the (-) form is active only above one part per thousand.

Knowing that one stereoisomer is much more active may help chemists develop better artificial attractants to lure crop-damaging insects into waiting traps.

## Anesthetics: How do they work?

It is clear that anesthetics work, but it's not clear how. Therese Di Paolo and Camille Sandorfy of the University of Montreal put forth an idea in the Dec. 6 NATURE. Fluorocarbon anesthetics such as halothane are known to break hydrogen bonds. Studying anesthetics with various, halogen constituents (C, F, Br, I), the team has now established an order of potency of bond breaking: F<C<Br<I. It is significant, they state, that this is also the order of increasing anesthetic potency. The agents may therefore act in the living system by breaking hydrogen bonds.

Science News, Vol. 107