

# Science<sup>®</sup> News

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**COVER:** Pediatricians are attempting to better understand bacterial and viral threats to the fetus and newborn infants so they can ward off these threats. See p. 242. (Photo: March of Dimes)

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# To the Editor

## The Asilomar decision

I am very pleased and delighted with the article "Decision at Asilomar" (SN: 3/22/75, p. 194). It is good to know that scientists are actually involved in imposing self-regulations on certain scientific work. I am neither pro nor con on this vital issue, since I do not have the necessary qualifications to make a sound decision. But, thank goodness, there are some scientists who are willing to consider the moral and the social implications of their scientific endeavors.

Ted Guzowski  
Union, N.J.

## Jovian phosphorus chemistry

The article, "A spot of phosphorus on Jupiter?" (SN: 3/1/75, p. 137) begins well, but strays afield about halfway through. The cycle described in paragraph three for phosphine (not phosphene) is garbled: If adequate water vapor (and adequate time) are available for complete reaction, solid  $P_4$  will become  $H_3PO_3$  or  $P_2O_5$ , which are both colorless. If water is lacking or mixing is too fast, then  $P_4$  may react with hydrogen to make  $PH_3$ , phosphine. The cycle  $PH_3 \rightarrow$  red phosphorus  $\rightarrow PH_3$  goes best if the water abundance is small, and  $P_2O_5$  and  $H_3PO_3$  are not formed.

Finally, the suggestion attributed to Fink regarding "red" ammonium (not ammonia) polysulfide, which is a solid (not a gas), was in fact due to Ron Prinn and myself almost five years ago. However, we pointed out at that time that ammonium polysulfides are yellow, orange, or brown, not red, and that they are likely coloring agents in the Belts (which are orange-brown), not in the Great Red Spot, which is red.

Because of these misunderstandings, the last paragraph of the story is completely wrong.

Let me hasten to add that we respect the efforts made by SCIENCE NEWS to communicate recent developments in science in clear and nontechnical language, and are not outraged by the shortcomings of this one article!

John S. Lewis  
Department of Earth and  
Planetary Sciences  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
Cambridge, Mass.

## Newcastle's Disease

I enjoyed the Feb. 15 issue, and the article entitled "Pets: All You Add is

Money" in the natural sciences section.

I would like to point out that Newcastle's Disease, which some think may have been brought in by parrots and mynah birds, but which is still in doubt, did not kill over 11 million California chickens in 1973. That number of chickens was killed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as part of their program to eradicate the disease which killed a considerably lesser number of chickens.

Ronald T. Reuther  
President

Philadelphia Zoological Garden  
Philadelphia, Pa.

## Psychic craze

The warning to the public by the panel of parapsychologists at the recent AAAS meeting against widespread commercial psychic practices (SN: 2/8/75, p. 89) must not go unheeded. If parapsychology is to remain as a respectable scientific field, the public must be made aware of the distinction between it and entertaining commercial displays of psychic "powers."

There is no reason not to believe that there is something about psychic phenomena that is unknown to modern science. Although the field of parapsychology is heavily laden with skeptics (including myself), there are many phenomena that cannot be explained or even doubted. Therefore, it is imperative that we continue scientific investigation into these areas. If we maintain our ignorance, we will be blind to any profound scientific (or supernatural) benefits that may be derived from an understanding of the causes of psychic phenomena.

However, all of this may become lost due to the recent psychic craze that is depraving the name of parapsychology in the United States and elsewhere. One can foresee how a serious erosion of funds to parapsychology research can occur as more and more philanthropists and other private benefactors associate the scientific approach with the circus act.

We must establish a nationwide program to publicize the scientific legitimacy of parapsychology research, and warn the public against its misuse. If we do not follow this advice set forth by Charles Honorton and the other members of the AAAS panel, we will soon watch parapsychology fall irretrievably into an abyss of ridicule.

Jerome Liebelson  
Spring Valley, N.Y.

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