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**COVER:** The Socratic method is getting updated as computers, simulators and other electronic devices take over some of the routine give-and-take of teaching. They hold the promise of more individualized, tailor-made instruction, but some experts warn that subtle dangers lurk. See p. 170. (Illustration: David Suter)

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# LETTERS

## Politics of mammography

Your excellent article on mass screening by mammography (SN: 8/7/76, p. 90) omits an important fact and hence an important question. The fact is that this was the largest and costliest medical experiment since the new laws for the protection of human subjects in such experiments were enacted. The question is: Why was there no compliance with the new laws and, in particular, the requirement that "informed consent" be obtained prior to treatment? Why weren't the 130,000 women under 50 told about the hazards and benefits of mammography before they were exposed to the X-ray?

The answer to this question is simple: If the women had been told the truth about the benefit-to-cost ratio there would have been no \$10-million-a-year program. As the new NCI-ACS guidelines stopping the screening of the women under 50 tacitly admit, the X-ray did the women more harm than good. According to my figures, for each woman possibly cured by early detection, there are 4 or 5 new cancers produced by the X-ray. Which raises another question. How could such a dangerous experiment be approved and funded when it was in open violation of federal laws? Here again the answer is simple: The program was rammed through over and above the objections of public health scientists both inside and outside of the National Cancer Institute by the political clout of the American Cancer Society.

Perhaps this may shock your idealistic younger readers but these are the "facts of life" in biomedical research today. Decisions are often made for political reasons, not scientific ones.

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*Note:* The statements made here represent the views of individuals in the Biostatistics Department and should not be construed as officially representing Roswell Park Memorial Institute for Cancer Research.

## Art hazards

In reference to your short article, "Paint Removers and Heart Attacks" (SN: 8/7/76, p. 92), your readers should be aware that there are two basic types of paint removers on the market. The one described in the article as causing a fatal heart attack is the "nonflammable" type containing methylene

chloride. It is the methylene chloride that is metabolized to carbon monoxide.

The second type is a complex mixture of solvents, usually containing benzol (benzene) and methanol as two of the components. I believe this type of paint remover is even more hazardous than the methylene chloride type. Both these solvents are hazardous not only by inhalation, but also by skin absorption. Methanol is a well known nervous system poison, and benzene is destructive to bone marrow, causing aplastic anemia and leucopenia. Benzene is also known to cause leukemia.

It is evident that many of the chemicals being used by artists, craftspeople, hobbyists, people with home workshops, etc. are hazardous and are being used without adequate protection. In most cases these materials are being used without even the knowledge that they are hazardous.

*Michael McCann, Ph.D.*

*Director*

*Art Hazards Resource Center*  
*New York, N.Y.*

## Support on bee traps

I was amazed at the reactions of some of your readers to the article on bee traps (Letters, SN: 8/28/76, p. 131). I am highly allergic to bees, and they seem to be attracted to me more than they are to the food on the table. The only way to keep them away is to kill them or to go inside myself. Normally one finds only three to five bees at the table. Therefore, killing off this many will probably not disrupt the environment. I would expect that more bees are killed by automobile traffic than by picnickers. Should we ban cars because they kill bees?

*Bruce Conner*  
*Adrian, Mich.*

## Legionnaire's disease

In your article "Legion disease: Tracking a killer" (SN: 8/14/76, p. 102), you seemed to suggest that African Lassa fever is caused by a bacteria. Quite the contrary!

The International Committee on Nomenclature of Viruses has classified Lassa fever as being caused by a virus of the genus arenavirus of the arbovirus (Arthropod borne) group. The type species for this genus is lymphocytic choriomeningitis.

In February of this year there was a reported case of Lassa fever in a Peace Corps worker in Sierra Leone, Africa. Lassa fever virus antibodies were detected in serologic tests.

Another occurrence of the disease was seen a few weeks ago in Toronto, Canada.

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