

OF THE WEEK

Brain graft successful in rats	308
Reserpine may increase cancer risk	309
Preparing for Skylab's descent	309
Radiation results from BEIR committee, NAS	310
Primate origin postulated in Burma	310
Channeling radiation	311
Evidence of oldest Bering Bridge man	311

RESEARCH NOTES

Energy	312
Space Sciences	312

ARTICLES

Chinese chemists engage in give and take	313
Carefully charted volcano spews data	314

DEPARTMENTS

Letters	307
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COVER: Plume of steam and ash rises 20,000 feet from April 22 explosion of La Soufrière on Caribbean Island of St. Vincent. Quick, coordinated action may mark this as the most studied volcano ever. See p. 314. (Photo: Richard Fiske, Smithsonian Institution)

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LETTERS

Super!

As one who has been actively involved in supergravity research, I was pleased to see the article "Supergroup," by Dietrick Thomsen (SN: 3/31/79, p. 214). However, some other facets of the theory, beyond its use as a unified field theory, deserve note as well. It has long been known that general relativity has no straightforward interpretation as a quantum field theory: The quantum corrections to the classical theory in general give unmanageable infinite results, due primarily to the restrictions imposed by the equivalence principle. Since supergravity incorporates standard general relativity in a very fundamental and unique way, it was hoped that the additional constraints imposed by the added symmetry would cause the unmanageable infinities to cancel each other. This indeed happens to the lowest order corrections, though it fails to work from the third order on. While this is still far from a useable theory, it is the best that has been achieved so far, and continuing research in this field may yet teach us about the fundamental role of the elusive theory of quantum gravity.

John H. Kay
Waltham, Mass.

Indignation over the Pert affair

The letter from William Pollin of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (SN: 3/24/79, p. 179) concerning NIDA's role in the Pert affair is nothing short of amazing, bordering on outrageous.

As readers who have followed the affair will recall, the 1978 Lasker Award for Basic Medical Research was given to three men — John Hughes, Hans Kosterlitz and Solomon Snyder — and not to a fourth participant in the research cited (first author on the first papers), Candace Pert. The omission of Pert led to a controversy, reported in both SCIENCE NEWS (SN: 2/24/79 p. 120) and SCIENCE (26 January and 2 March). In those reports, an unnamed member of the Lasker Award jury and several colleagues of Dr. Pert and the other researchers were variously quoted to the effect that Pert may have been omitted from the Lasker group because of her graduate student status and that, in any case, the award should have included three other researchers beside Pert: Avram Goldstein, Eric Simon, and Lars Terenius.

The reports by Joan Arehart-Treichel (SCIENCE NEWS) and Jean Marx (SCIENCE) appear to have stirred William Pollin to reveal that, fully a year before the Lasker controversy, NIDA had given its Pacesetter Research Award to six of the seven investigators named above: the men. Pollin notes that, "in retrospect, we feel that it was a significant omission on our part that Dr. Candace Pert was not included" in the NIDA citation.

Pollin "explains" further: "Selecting recipients for prestigious awards is a *complex social process* [emphasis ours] in which 'scientific merit,' unfortunately, is often only one of many considerations. Sometimes, serious mistakes are made. This should not detract, however, from the satisfaction we can all share at the continuing dramatic progress in the opiate receptor and peptide research area."

Unfortunately, this "serious mistake" and the later, and more serious, "omission" in the Lasker Award do detract very considerably from our satisfaction. Moreover, the errors leave us wondering just what is involved in the "complex social process" of selecting award recipients.

We are science writers, like Arehart-Treichel and Marx, and we cover several fields among us. The Pert affair is not the only instance we can cite, both from our wide reading and our personal experience, of "serious mistakes" in regard to recognition of the accomplishments of women in science. Perhaps we have a better vantage point than the members of the Lasker jury or of the awards committee of NIDA. For us, "serious mistakes" added one to another make up a pattern, a discriminatory pattern in which each incident seems not merely "incidental" or "mistaken" but actually sinister.

And we ask, where is it written that mistakes cannot be rectified? Why cannot the Lasker jury reconvene and redo its work? Why cannot the NIDA group do likewise? Why should Pert suffer from having been passed over twice for awards in which, according to all the testimony, she justly deserved to share? Now instead it seems that, far from being nominated for a Nobel prize, the victim is in danger of being turned into the criminal by short memories. We will not be surprised, for example, if in a few years the affair is whispered about thus: "Pert? There must be something wrong with her, or with her work. She was passed over for two awards in her field, you know." Of course, Pert can always post Pollin's letter on her laboratory wall. She might even invite the members of the Swedish Academy to view it. But that seems to us a poor substitute for the recognition she has earned.

Let no scientist misunderstand us. Science writers are important links between scientists and the public, and often between scientists and other scientists. The best of them will not long function in the interests of science if the various fields remain, as they appear to be today, "old boys' clubs" in which it is not what you do but who you are and who you know that counts. And let no scientific administrator misunderstand. Fields whose systems of rewards are riddled with hypocrisy and/or sexism stand to lose their best practitioners along with their best defenders and interpreters.

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