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COVER: With tentacles resembling rabbit ears, the marine snail *Aplysia* is a popular choice of neurobiologists. It has large nerve cells that can be individually identified. Now its behavioral repertoire is being explored. See p. 218. (Photo: Wayne P. Aspey)

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LETTERS

Speak metric

I hope you will not give much consideration to John De Ford's suggestion that you clutter up your fine publication with "translations" of metric quantities (SN: 8/18/79, p. 115). Quite aside from the silliness of clinging to a system of units so clumsy and archaic that virtually every nation but the United States has stopped using it, the English system does not belong in scientific discussion. SI is the *lingua franca* of science, and appeals to the "familiarity" of English units are only the lazy person's way of resisting a change that can bring nothing but improvement.

If you would return to the English system in science reporting, then you might as well devote space to the phlogiston theory and to cancers caused by toads living in people's stomachs.

Richard S. Holmes
College Park, Md.

Danger of overheating

I never cease to wonder at the amount of effort put into developing energy sources that are "new" as far as the steady state of the atmosphere is concerned, with apparently no heed being paid to whether or not these sources will disrupt the steady state (see for instance SN: 7/21/79, p. 52). My colleagues in the atmospheric sciences tell me that at present it is impossible to forecast when or what changes might occur. One guess as to the level of new energy which might produce changes is at about 1 percent of the present heat balance (Von Arx, Eos, Sept. 1974). If all the peoples of the world consumed energy at the same per capita rate as the United States, this would amount to about .1 percent. Since the per capita energy consumption is likely to grow, as is the world population, it would seem that if we are to avoid a catastrophe, we should be aiming at re-routing energy already in the system (i.e. direct solar, tides, wind, etc.) instead of developing "new" energy sources. More power to the solar energy lobby, so to speak.

D. B. Stone
Fairbanks, Alaska

Questioning the abortion ethic

I was displeased that your article, "Questioning the New Genetics" (SN: 9/1/79, p. 154) did not make mention of the fact that there are scientists who do not accept abortion as an ethical practice. I am concerned that your article could unfairly and effectively leave many of your readers with the impression that there is no disagreement with the abortion ethic.

There is serious disagreement with the use of abortion for the resolution of problems and disease. Because abortion is individualized and is left up to the decision of the mother (although the views expressed by Joseph Fletcher seem to be preparing the stage for rationalizing public

rights to reproductive determinations when he is quoted as saying, "The right to reproduce is a privilege" and "Our gonads and gametes are not private possessions"), the connection with the philosophy of the Nazi regime is obscured, but the thinking is similar, in that destructive processes were seen as a means to improving the race. I submit to you and your readers that this approach is no more meaningful on a one on one basis than it was on the massive basis of the despots of history. I further submit to you that the reasons for abortion which emerge from the increased technological studies and procedures that allow for earlier and keener diagnoses are no loftier than those of the infamous political geneticists of the past.

In addition, it is no less true that respected and revered scientists and doctors mistakenly involved themselves in these historic atrocities to the same degree as they do today and with pretty much of the same types of rationalizations and procedures.

Consider the current attitudes and practices that promulgate death as the solution to life and the erroneous belief that you can significantly alter the presence of regressive genes more quickly by culling than you can by studies and practices aimed at normalization — two giant steps backwards for humankind.

Monte Harris Liebman, M.D.
Hartland, Wis.

If you liked Teng, you'll love Dung

Articles about the People's Republic of China (SN: 9/1/79, p. 150) brought to mind something that has been bothering me for years: the confusion over the transliteration of Chinese sounds into English. When I was a child the capital city was known to me as Beiping. Since then I've heard (and seen) Peiping, Peking, Pekin, and lately, Beijing. Other transformations are evident in Nanjing (Nanking?), Mao Tse-Tung (Tse-Dung, Dze-Dzung), just to mention a couple.

Surely regional variants are not that much different. Surely the fact that Chinese is a "living" language cannot explain such changes in only two or three decades. I can understand the closeness of Pand B, and T and D sounds, but K and J? -in and -ing? Those are very different sounds, to my ear. What's going on? What's correct? Why the changes?

W. H. Beauman
Westmont, Ill.

(Many Chinese sounds do not correspond exactly to sounds in English, French or Portuguese. Visitors wrote down what they judged was the nearest equivalent to what they heard. An Englishman might write Peking, a Frenchman Pékin. Even on more scientific principles several systems of transliteration grew up. What has happened is a massive shift from the generally popular system to one that is said to be closer to Chinese sounds and freer of inconsistencies. The impetus for the shift came from the U.S. government and The New York Times. One suspects that it is something that is expected to please the Chinese. —Ed.)

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