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Letters

An epidemic in the air

I found the article "An Epidemic in the Works" (SN: 9/18/82, p. 188) both startling and timely. Especially troublesome is the fact that children are so often the defenseless victims. A very current case of the same phenomenon of mass hysteria marked by rashes and fevers among children appears to be occurring on very long distance nonstop flights from Asia to the United States.

On my way to Beijing this summer I passed through Tokyo. To my surprise and puzzlement, I noticed an announcement in the airport which requested passengers with rashes or fever to report to health officials. I didn't think anything further about it until I returned to the United States in late August. Two of my colleagues happened to mention that on nonstop flights from Tokyo to Chicago and New York respectively, all of the children on board became seriously ill, breaking out in rashes and developing flu-like symptoms. They reported that the bathrooms were filthy, especially after flight times that approached or exceeded 20 hours. The feeling of

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Cover: Untitled 22" x 36½" Polaroid print by Joel Slayton was produced with the use of a Perkin-Elmer 3220 CPU. Slayton and other exhibitors at a recent art show explain why they've embraced the computer and its peripherals to explore the dimensions of their craft. (Photo courtesy of Slayton 1981/Siggraph 82)



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entrapment on the planes coupled with the revulsion of urine-sprayed bathrooms left uncleaned parallels the conditions triggering mass hysteria described by the various researchers in the article. Both planes in this case were quarantined when they landed, and no one was allowed to deplane until U.S. health officials came aboard to check the situation.

Now that these long nonstop flights are being opened by more and more airlines in order to cut travel time and fuel costs, jet flight hysteria might well become an epidemic in the works.

John F. Hartmann
DeKalb, Ill.

An oversight

Thank you very much for sending me the article by Dietrick Thomsen on the Fermilab Doubler/Saver project (SN: 9/25/82, p. 196). The article is excellent, but I would like to correct one oversight. The collaboration building the large detector that Dennis Theriot and I are associated with involves physicists from Italy as well as the U.S. and Japan.

Roy F. Schwitters
Batavia, Ill.

Corrections: Our recent article on the recovery of Comet Halley (SN: 10/30/82, p. 277) stated that the comet will pass closest to the earth in 1985. In reality, its closest approach before perihelion will occur on Nov. 27, 1985, at a distance of about 0.62 astronomical units (AU), but it will come closer still after perihelion, getting as near as 0.42 AU on April 11, 1986. Also, the Caltech astronomers who were the first to sight it in its present apparition did so when it was at a distance of about 11 AU, not 11 billion. In the words of reader Wendy Lindboe of Hyattsville, Md.:

*I believe that 11 billion
Is an orbit too big to put Halley in.
In furlongs, perhaps,
It would fit on the maps,
But AUs it would simply be silly in.*

Correction: The Center for Science in the Public Interest has recommended the Food and Drug Administration ban unnecessary use of metabisulfites in food or limit their use to 350 micrograms per serving (SN: 11/6/82, p. 294).

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