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Letters

Don't blame epilepsy

It was rather distressing that Dr. Ervin felt so comfortable in suggesting psychomotor epilepsy as a cause for "transient psychosis" and violence ("Premenstrual Changes," SN: 12/11/82, p. 380). Like the cyclical menstrual cycle, it becomes periodically fashionable to attribute violence [to] epilepsy, as a convenient way to explain any phenomenon that is not understood.

Epilepsy affects over two million Americans, of which about half are women. The "transient psychosis" that Dr. Ervin, a psychiatrist, attributes to psychomotor epilepsy does not exist as a diagnostic criterion in the [standard psychiatric manual]. Nor would a neurologist solely diagnose psychomotor epilepsy based on someone becoming "temporarily psychotic for a few days" and having no recall for events which occurred during that time. It is common among those who commit violent and/or criminal acts . . . [to deny] the act or [claim] loss of memory for the act. This is not a basis for assuming that the act itself was part of a seizure.

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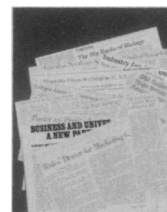
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Campus and Company Partnerships

Cover: Much attention has focused on new research partnerships between universities and industry. A recent conference highlighted many of the dilemmas and conflicts involved in these developing experiments in cooperation.



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The article [cited] a legal defense which successfully utilized temporal lobe epilepsy for murder. This defense has been used over the years with some limited success, not because it is based on fact but rather because it is legally expedient. It is well known medically that during a seizure a person cannot perform any act that is complicated and/or goal directed. . . .

Because of this tendency to [connect] violence with epilepsy, the National Institute for Neurological and Communicative Disorders and Stroke convened an international panel of experts in 1980 to study this issue. In the thousands of cases [that] they studied they could not find any evidence of goal directed aggression or violence. Therefore, in order for a criminal and/or violent act to be attributed as having occurred during and as part of a psychomotor seizure, certain very firm criteria would have to be met. The use of such criteria would eliminate the casual reliance of psychomotor seizures as the sole proof that the subject was not in control of his/her actions. The international panel suggested five relevant criteria to determine whether in a specific in-

stance a violent crime was the result of an epileptic seizure:

1. The diagnosis of epilepsy in such a person should be established by at least one neurologist with a special competence in epilepsy.

2. The presence of epileptic automatism should be documented by the history and by closed-circuit television and electroencephalographic biotelemetry.

3. The presence of aggression during epileptic automatism should be verified in a videotape-recorded seizure in which ictal epileptiform patterns are also recorded on the electroencephalogram.

4. The aggressive or violent act should be characteristic of the patient's habitual seizures as elicited in the history.

It has become commonplace, unfortunately, to . . . use "epilepsy" to explain anything and everything [that] is negative. This attitude is an affront to the great majority of normal people who happen to have epilepsy but [have] no other problem that would distinguish them

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from the ordinary population. Certainly to additionally attribute "violent behavior" to this highly stigmatized group, numbering over 2 million Americans, is an unfair and regressive attitude without any scientific basis.

Reina Berner, MSW, ACSW
Executive Director
Arnold Frucht, M.D.
Medical Director
The Epilepsy Institute
New York, N.Y.

A technical distraction

I was dismayed to read your article on the MX missiles ("Reagan's MX 'Peacekeeper' Draws Fire." SN: 12/4/82, p. 356). By focusing on the technological aspects of hardening, the writer distracts us from the larger issue. Talking about weapons technology and "disarmament vs. armament" seems rather like trying to reason with a schizophrenic. There are no solutions within that framework.

Yet, think of what bright, well-trained, scientific minds could do if they were focused on the larger issue. What would a billion dollars spent on research in conflict resolution produce?

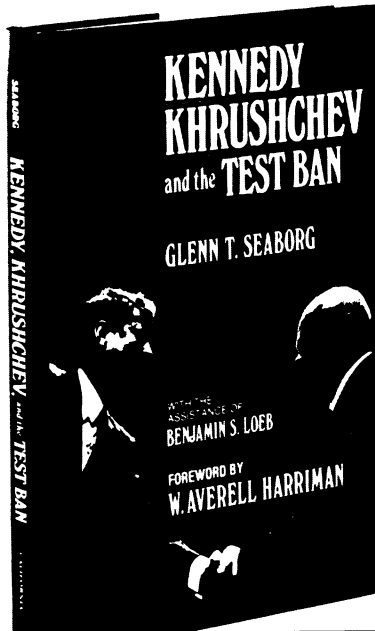
Scientists, first of all, should question the rationale of an apparent need for humans who happen to be born in different places to wage wars every 22 years or so.

If a visitor from another planet were here, it would probably be puzzled by our behavior, or at least conclude that we are a planet of lower life forms, not yet possessed of much intelligence. No wonder ET wanted to go home!

Beryl Payne, Ph.D.
Plymouth, Mass.

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