

# Letters

## Traits of the learning-disabled

As a longtime reader of SCIENCE NEWS, I must respond to your report, "Depression may be key to some learning disabilities" (SN: 3/2/85, p. 132). Most learning-disabled children also have temperamental traits that make life difficult for them. They develop a poor "self-image," which makes them seem depressed. This is not the same as depressive illness.

More than 15 years ago, Silver and Hagin demonstrated a successful method for preventing reading disability. The later behavioral problems, often seen as a response to reading disability, still occurred. The evidence suggests that 20 to 30 percent of children are not ready to learn to read in first grade. If reading were not taught until second grade, those children would not fail. Let's not jump on new fads unless the evidence is more persuasive.

Hans Huessy  
Professor of Child Psychiatry  
University of Vermont College of Medicine  
Burlington, Vt.

## 'Tolerable' toxins?

It was no thrill to read in "Gene splicing for herbicide resistance" (SN: 3/2/85, p. 140) that Calgene scientists can selectively increase the tolerance of food crops to the herbicide glyphosate. The result, indeed aim, of this can only be to allow the use of more herbicides into an environment that is already oversaturated with manufactured toxins. I suppose the next step will be to alter humans so they can tolerate

higher levels of herbicide and pesticide residue.

Allyn Uptain  
Rockford, Ala.

## Psychology's paper chase

Thank you for reviewing Rae Carlson's analysis of the irrelevant and shoddy research published in the most prestigious personality/social psychology journal ("Research foul-ups and blunders," SN: 2/23/85, p. 120). For some time now, a small minority has complained about the quality of behavioral research and the ethics of investigators. Alas! Their efforts are doomed to failure. You see, we publish not to advance knowledge or engage in theoretical debate but to have articles for the personnel committee and the dean to count. Each of those sorry articles Carlson analyzed will count as much toward a merit increase as will her significant contribution.

Ray H. Bixler  
Department of Psychology  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Ky.

## Electroshock propaganda?

Bruce Bower's report from the International Conference on Electroconvulsive Therapy ("The patients' perspective on ECT," SN: 2/2/85, p. 74) falls prey to all the propaganda put out by the rejuvenated electroshock lobby. Although there have been no important innovations in electroshock in more than 20 years, shock is being promoted in a new, carefully orchestrated campaign. The meeting in New York was more a pep rally than a scientific conference. Critics of

electroshock were excluded, except for a panel of former patients who threatened to picket if they were not represented. Those of us who have published books or articles pertaining to brain damage from the treatment were simply not invited to present.

Bower describes a study in which a number of patients were followed up one year after treatment and asked how they felt about the treatment. A major characteristic of brain-damaged patients is the tendency to confabulate—to hide and dissemble about their damage. Only a clinical interview based on this awareness could disclose the patients' true feelings about their mental status following shock.

We are told that patients did not recall giving informed consent prior to treatment, but we are reassured that they were. In my own experience, shock patients are never told that the treatment can cause brain damage and they are never told that the treatment is so controversial that many doctors and hospitals never administer it. Without this information, the consent is not informed.

Peter R. Breggin, M.D.  
Bethesda, Md.

## Annual event

Re the statement, "About 500,000 U.S. patients have their gallstone-forming gallbladders removed each year" (SN: 2/16/85, p. 104): Bad enough to have your gallbladder removed once, but *each year*? Oh, dear, and it's such a nuisance, too.

Rebecca T. Northen  
San Luis Obispo, Calif.

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