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Letters

Nonvitamin D

"Study sheds light on TB resistance" (SN: 1/23/88, p.60) contains some intriguing information and a semantic error which did not originate with you but which remains, apparently ossified, in the medical literature. There is no dietary requirement for vitamin D, since it's a hormone synthesized in the body from cholesterol and activated by sunlight. Therefore it's not a vitamin. Ditto for vitamin A (retinol) synthesized in the body from beta carotene, a photosynthetic plant pigment in food, which arguably is a vitamin.

Such nitpicking is not without clinical significance, since of the hypervitaminoses, A and D occur most commonly, and most commonly from the overuse of vitamin pills. This would not happen if these substances were not included in the pills in the first place. The nonvitamins A and D should be reclassified, perhaps as drugs.

William Harris
Honolulu, Hawaii

These are good points, although many scientists believe that vitamin D supplements may be recommended for pregnant women, for people

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Cover: To save the life-protecting ozone layer, the industrialized nations of the world are planning to limit their use of chlorofluorocarbons and halons. These ozone-destroying compounds are important elements of refrigerators, air conditioners, foam insulation and firefighting equipment. Chemical companies are now mounting a multimillion-dollar search for safe replacements. (Photo courtesy Air Force Engineering and Services' Fire Technology Research Branch)



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who are rarely exposed to sunlight and for the few who don't synthesize the hormone properly (a problem that can result in ricketts).

— R. Weiss

Cave conclusions questioned

I doubt that the recently dated "burnt flints" from Qafzeh, Israel, provide "direct evidence that Neanderthals could breed with people from other parts of the world," as Prof. Wolpoff is credited with saying ("An earlier dawn for modern humans?" SN: 2/27/88, p.138).

The idea of coexisting races of *Homo* in the Near East is not a new one. Representatives of each are alleged to be present in the hominid remains from cave sites at Mount Carmel and northern Iraq. The earlier age implied for the more modern type raises the conundrum of how the more primitive form arose and became so widespread (i.e., in the Middle East and across Europe) during the earlier phases of the last glacial epoch, after circa 70,000 years ago. The allegation that the Neanderthals "appear to have been poorer foragers" is pejorative. They may have been biologically better adapted to midlatitude and periglacial environments than their

"more advanced" contemporaries who originated in the tropics and subtropics of Africa.

William P. McHugh
Wilksburg, Pa.

Tribal terror

"Murder in Good Company" (SN: 2/6/88, p.90) provided interesting factual information on the high murder rate among the otherwise docile Gebusi of New Guinea. However, the various hypotheses offered to explain this behavior all overlook one very basic human response. Human beings, in the face of uncontrollable and inexplicable death, are most vulnerable. Helplessness and fear are dealt with by identifying a cause (in this case sorcery) for the unexplained death. The identified cause provides something tangible that can be controlled or entirely eliminated (killing the sorcerer), thereby restoring a sense of power and control.

When I read the article, it brought to mind the outbreak of bubonic plague in the 14th century. As the population of Europe was being decimated by this disease of unknown origin, accusations of Jews poisoning the

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