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Letters

Developmental distinction

Stefi Weisburd makes a strange statement in her article on Australian fauna: "Marsupials incubate their young in an external pouch rather than in a placenta" ("Creatures of the Dreamtime," SN: 4/16/88, p.248). *Incubate* is generally restricted to egg layers, and the *placenta* is the organ of exchange between the fetus and the mammalian mother.

It would be correct to say, "The development of the marsupial fetus is completed in the mother's external pouch, nourished by the mother's milk. The mammalian fetus develops to term within the uterus of the mother, nourished through the placenta."

William C. Kaufman
Woodinville, Wash.

No UV for newborns

I have long enjoyed your magazine and was

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Cover: Globally, forests cover roughly 4.1 billion hectares, or about three times as much land as is cultivated for crops. But deforestation, especially in the tropics, is reducing that tree cover by an area the size of Pennsylvania each year. By the end of the century, the 33 developing countries that now qualify as net exporters of wood may be reduced to fewer than 10. Ironically, many countries have created economic incentives to destroy or plunder one of their most valuable resources. A new study shows why this is so costly and argues that forest conservation is really in a government's own economic interests. (Illustration adapted from poster by Bobbi Tull, courtesy Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service [SITES], from the exhibition "Diversity Endangered")



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especially interested in the article about a new approach to protecting newborns against the hazards of hyperbilirubinemia ("New therapy blocks newborn jaundice," SN: 4/16/88, p.247). There is, however, one point in your article that deserves correction. If pediatricians really used ultraviolet light in phototherapy of infants with high bilirubin levels, we would need to lay in a heavy supply of sunscreen in addition to the already requisite eye patches. Actually, blue to green visible light seems to be most effective in the photoisomerization of unconjugated bilirubin, thereby converting it to a soluble form that can be excreted by the kidneys.

Prescott Atkinson
The Children's Hospital
Birmingham, Ala.

Splitting hairs?

In "Fingerprinting DNA from a single hair" (SN: 4/23/88, p.262), which mentions the work done by our group, perhaps too much is being

made of the degree to which one person can be distinguished from another. "One in 30 billion" is meaningless if human errors in the typing are made at a rate 30 million times this (a mistake once per 1,000 tests is pretty good going for tests such as these). On the other hand, if a test is inexpensive and simple to do — as are blood tests — it will be used even when better tests are available. The reason is cost-effectiveness. One will perform the most tests with the cheapest test, in order to eliminate as many suspects as possible before using, if at all, the more powerful (but more complex and expensive) test.

We hope to bring our test into the category of "inexpensive and simple to do" — even with only 21 genotypes it will far outstrip blood typing and will be able to do samples no other test can.

Russell Higuchi
Associate Scientist
Dept. of Human Genetics
Cetus Corp.
Emeryville, Calif.

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