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Letters

Ebola outbreak: Conflicting reports

In "The Viral Advantage" (SN: 9/23/89, p.200), Rick Weiss gives an excellent, albeit ominous, overview of the emergence of viral diseases resulting from such phenomena as alteration in host range and genetic mutation conferring new virulence. But he makes two comments that cannot easily be reconciled on the basis of simple mathematics.

When discussing the 1976 Ebola virus outbreak in Zaire and Sudan, he states that the virus "infected more than 1,000 people and left about 500 dead." Yet in the very next paragraph, he writes that the virus had a mortality rate greater than 90 percent.

Daniel B. Di Giulio
South Holland, Ill.

We apologize for the confusion. To encompass varying reports from different sources, the second passage should have read "a mortality rate of 50 to 90 percent." The 90 percent figure came from virologists at National Biosystems, Inc., in Rockville, Md., and at the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Dis-

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Cover: Most cigarette smokers are physically and psychologically dependent on their "best friends," but some light smokers show no signs of dependence. Studies of nonaddicted smokers — also known as cigarette "chippers" — may shed light on the nature of nicotine addiction. Researchers are also looking at nondependent users of other drugs, such as cocaine, to understand better why some people get hooked on intoxicating substances while others do not. (1935 advertisement courtesy of the D'Arcy Collection of the Communications Library/University of Illinois)
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eases (USAMRIID) in Frederick, Md. The infection and death numbers came from a different USAMRIID virologist. Government officials and others in the United States and Africa have been unable to agree on how many people actually became infected and succumbed to the epidemic.

— R. Weiss

Anti-quake injections

It is true that the relationship between oil drilling and earthquakes has been little understood since the 1920s ("Oil wells cause earthquakes," SN: 10/28/89, p.279). I wonder if petroleum engineers, geologists and seismologists have ever considered pooling their collective experience to investigate whether — and how — strategic drilling might be used to relieve stress along faults with a high potential for sudden movement.

Fred R. Monaco
Sunland, Calif.

"It was sort of a hot topic 20 years ago, but it was never pursued," replies Paul Segall of the U.S. Geological Survey in Menlo Park, Calif. Some

researchers proposed pumping fluid into the ground to control earthquakes, he says. But since rock permeability influences where a fluid goes, and since the rock surrounding faults tends to be fairly impermeable, scientists would find it difficult to predict where a pumped-in fluid might go and what it might do. Says Segall, "Can you imagine if you accidentally set off the big one?"

— A. McKenzie

Sweeping analogy

Sandy Shaw's chain of logic (Letters, SN: 10/28/89, p.275) is one step removed from the actual situation described in "Big dividends from pollution cleanup" (SN: 9/16/89, p.191). The fact is that the vandal in Shaw's scenario has already shattered the window. The health effects of pollution (not to mention the environmental effects) are now beginning to be felt. The question is: Do we replace the broken glass or leave it lying in the street? Do we let our children hurt themselves playing with broken glass, or do we get out the broom?

Barry W. Van Dorn
Tinley Park, Ill.

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