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Letters

Search for benefits

I applaud Charles W. Morgan (Letters, SN: 11/3/90, p.275) for emphasizing the fact that "evolution" is random and devoid of purpose. But acknowledging this shouldn't deter the fascinating discipline of searching for the survival benefits of existing traits, since almost all species-wide traits have been shown after the fact to have species survival benefits.

Robert E. McDaniel
Las Cruces, N.M.

Redirecting research efforts

You quote S. Jay Olshansky as stating that dramatically decreased death rates from cancer, heart disease, etc., would be required for U.S. life expectancies to rise much above the current level ("Job market looks stable for undertakers," SN: 11/10/90, p.301). Therefore, he concludes, effort should be devoted to improving the "quality" of life rather than its length.

An equally valid and more constructive conclusion would be that effort should be devoted to understanding the fundamental basis of human aging, rather than the diseases it entails. Aging, like AIDS, is a disease that kills through its complications. But unlike AIDS, aging is viewed complacently by most of the life science community.

It seems to me that the best way for inquisitive people such as biologists to improve the quality of life would be to gain some insight into, and possibly control over, the process that is slowly killing them.

Michael Lenker
Radiologist
Kelsey-Seybold Clinic
Houston, Texas

Some major points raised in our paper were not mentioned in your article. Approaching the upper limits to human longevity has obvious implications for social security, medicare and numerous other programs. Shifting our research emphasis toward the nonfatal

diseases of aging involves major changes in health policy at the national level — the kinds of changes that will have a profound influence on overall research funding in the medical and biological sciences. Finally, the types of changes in medicine and medical technology that will be required to increase life expectancy from present levels to 85 years and beyond require a new way of thinking about technology assessment and quality of life

S. Jay Olshansky
University of Chicago
Argonne National Laboratory
Argonne, Ill.

Address communications to:

Editor, SCIENCE NEWS
1719 N St., NW
Washington, D.C. 20036

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All letters subject to editing.

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