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Letters

Risky business

Job stress does bad things to all of us, so it is not surprising that it can affect the processes going on as a baby prepares to enter our world ("Job stress: A risk for pregnant workers?" SN: 3/16/91, p.165). And video display terminals have been maligned for grievances ranging from screen glare and carpal tunnel syndrome to electromagnetic radiation from the inner parts of the terminal ("Good news for pregnant VDT workers?" SN: 3/23/91, p.190).

But perhaps a more insidious threat is the computer to which these terminals are attached — which can become the worst sort of Big Brother by keeping a microscopic watch on the "productivity" of the workers.

Workers may be intimidated out of taking needed bathroom breaks, for example, or unwinding for a minute or two after a telephone session with a difficult customer. The trouble is that the computer can keep track of every second of the worker's time and report it to the boss. This adds up to lots of stress.

It may be that the VDT manufacturers have

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Cover: Two years after the controversial announcement that cold fusion had occurred in an apparatus resembling this electrolytic cell, most scientists have given up on the existence of this perplexing phenomenon. But a few investigators continue to find bits of evidence that convince them the cold fusion puzzle can be solved. (Photo: University of Utah)

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done all that's needed to reduce electromagnetic emissions, and that the problems the workers experienced in the recent VDT study have to do with sitting still too long with the boss/computer watching too closely. That's stress!

*Dan Larson
Downers Grove, Ill.*

I take issue with the conclusion and some methods in Teresa M. Schnorr's epidemiologic study. In their research paper, Schnorr and her colleagues conclude: "The use of VDTs and exposure to the accompanying electromagnetic fields were not associated with an increased risk of spontaneous abortion in the study." This improperly led to media summary statements such as USA Today's March 14 headline, "VDTs don't raise risk of miscarriage."

Two shortcomings in the study reduce its value in determining whether pregnant women who operate VDTs have more miscarriages. For one, the study did not have a true control group, since VDT operators and non-VDT operators had similar exposure to the pulsed ELF

(extremely low-frequency) radiation many experts feel is most harmful. Moreover, Schnorr specifically excluded miscarriages that occurred during the first 14 days of pregnancy, when 60 percent of spontaneous abortions normally occur (often without the woman's notice) and when animal research indicates that women are most vulnerable. Animal research had already shown that no radiation-related abortion increase was likely for the pregnancy phase Schnorr studied.

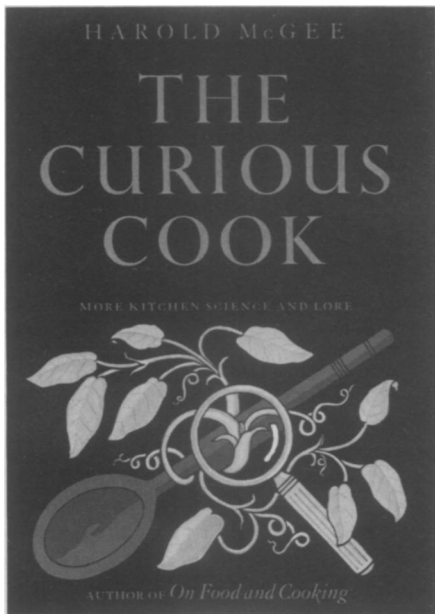
Schnorr acknowledged the control group problem in comments reported in the March 14 Washington Post: "Because the NIOSH researchers found similar ELF exposure levels among both VDT users and nonusers, Schnorr said the study does not indicate whether ELF exposure increased miscarriage risk."

Recent mouse experiments funded by Sweden's National Institute of Radiation Protection show that electromagnetic field (EMF) exposure during the first five days of pregnancy (the preimplantation period) almost

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In this lighthearted and informative book, Harold McGee, author of *On Food and Cooking*, applies a scrupulous scientific method to his entertaining pursuit of culinary enlightenment. In the first of three sections, he experiments with traditional kitchen practices and the biochemical nature of various common foods, investigating the hows and whys of preparing Jerusalem artichokes, guacamole, mayonnaise, persimmons and much more. In the second section, he addresses current dietary controversies surrounding heart disease, cancer and Alzheimer's disease, dispelling many time-honored myths and presenting a balanced outlook on diet and health.

McGee's final chapters cover historical attempts to understand cooking and eating as well as recent biological and chemical findings that offer a glimpse into the mysterious nature of gastronomic enjoyment. Packed with literary and historical anecdotes, this collection of browsable kitchen lore is bound to interest both active and armchair chefs.

Why do lettuce, avocados and basil leaves turn brown? And how can you retain the green in salads, guacamole and pesto?

North Point Press, 1990, 339 pages, 6 1/4" x 9 1/4", hardcover, \$19.95

Does searing meat really seal in the juices? And how do you keep tender meats from becoming tough by the end of a braise?

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doubled placental resorptions of fertilized eggs. The Swedish team found no placental resorption increase when exposure began on day 7. The human preimplantation equivalent to this period is the first 6 to 9 days.

If these mouse findings directly related to women's pregnancy experience, VDT operators would have a very hard time having children. Radiation exposure during very early pregnancy would reduce normal live births from 500 to about 300 per 1,000 pregnancies.

James A. Doilney
President, Wellware Corp.
(radiation mitigation technology)
Park City, Utah

Blaming young victims

We were very disturbed by C.E. Wright's suggestion (Letters, SN: 3/2/91, p.131) that in some cases child abuse results from the behavior of the child rather than the behavior of the adult, and by Wright's call for research "to determine where the abuse cycle starts." This view joins in the venerable tradition of victim blaming, which apparently needs to be continually challenged.

We already have a rough understanding of the dynamics that lead to the repeated abuse of some children. "Deficient social skills" are all that abused children have had modeled for them in the home, and skills learned outside the home don't work there. Anger and "high levels of aggression" are in a sense appropriate responses to abuse. Placement in a foster home is a new and anxiety-filled situation, and

children come to it with the only behaviors and coping skills they know. Foster parents are not trained to help children learn new coping skills, or even to know exactly what to expect. Abused children often can't tell what their limits or boundaries are until they are beaten up, and may push to that point in order to find out. In fact, they may have learned no other method for getting attention. Parents frequently apologize and give children extra attention after beating them, compounding the child's confusion and compulsion to elicit beatings. The intent of this "repetition compulsion" is to avoid becoming the victim, although its effect is further victimization.

What is surprising, given all that they have going against them, is that only about "one in three abused children displayed unusually high levels of aggression and deficient social skills" ("Charting the aftermath of child abuse," SN: 1/12/91, p.29).

Victim blaming may be a common reaction to situations in which people feel horrified and helpless to help the victim. If people realized why they have victim-blaming gut reactions, they might be able to step back and view these situations more clearly and constructively.

Sioux Hall
T.J. Ellermeier
Cambridge, Mass.

CORRECTION

In "Memories Might Be Made of This" (SN: 5/25/91, p.328), a mechanical production error transposed the top two pictures in the series showing how protein kinase C moves through the hippocampus when baby rabbits first open their eyes.

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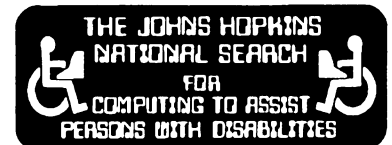
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