

Brain goals for the 1990s

Some sociologists have depicted scientists as a tribe with their own cultural practices, myths, and rituals. And members of this particular tribe aren't in the habit of proclaiming the specific mysteries of nature they intend to solve and then issuing a delivery date. But that's just what a group of distinguished neuroscientists did at an April 27 press briefing in Washington, D.C.

Backed by a neuroscience philanthropy, the Charles A. Dana Foundation, the researchers have identified "attainable objectives" that neuroscience can achieve by the end of the 1990s, which Congress has declared the Decade of the Brain. Calling itself the Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives, the 62-member group includes representatives of government and industry.

Repeatedly citing the revolution in human genetics over the past decade, alliance members say neuroscience will identify genes linked to a suite of brain-related disorders. These include Alzheimer's disease, manic-depressive illness, and inherited forms of deafness and blindness.

Also, the alliance predicts, researchers will have gathered by decade's end the basic knowledge to develop new treatments for major afflictions, including brain and spinal cord injury, stroke, multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's disease, epilepsy, Parkinson's disease, manic-depressive illness, anxiety disorders, drug addiction, schizophrenia, chronic pain, and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig's disease).

Finally, the alliance promises significant progress in understanding the basic mechanisms of learning and memory.

The alliance counts among its members some of the most recognizable names in brain research. However, members of neuroscience's rank and file polled by the Dana Foundation

expressed some doubt that all the objectives could actually be attained by the year 2000, according to the foundation.

Alliance member Guy M. McKhann stands behind his group's predictions. He emphasizes the members' efforts to remain realistic in spite of their optimism. "These goals weren't pulled out of the blue," says McKhann, a neurologist at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore. "These are things that we really think are going to happen."

Clinton to sign Earth pact

In an address commemorating Earth Day, President Bill Clinton pledged to sign the United Nations convention popularly known as the biodiversity treaty. In the April 21 speech, he also promised to reduce U.S. emissions of greenhouse gases to 1990 levels by the year 2000.

At last year's Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, George Bush drew criticism from environmentalists for refusing to sign the biodiversity pact. Among other things, the agreement obligates signatory nations to share benefits from the commercial use of the world's plants and animals. At the time, Bush said he feared that these provisions would undermine the U.S. biotechnology industry by endangering patent rights to new products derived from species harvested in other countries (SN: 6/20/92, p.407).

After consulting with environmentalists and industry representatives, Clinton pledged to include with his signature on the treaty an "interpretive statement" addressing industry's concerns. Consequently, says Carl B. Feldbaum, president of the Biotechnology Industry Organization in Washington, D.C., "the main uncertainty [over patent protection] has been cleared up to everybody's satisfaction."



The anguished, volatile intensity we associate with the artistic temperament, often described as "a fine madness," has been thought of as a defining aspect of much artistic genius. Now, Kay Jamison's brilliant work, based on years of studies as a clinical psychologist and prominent researcher in mood disorders, reveals that many artists who were subject to alternately exultant and then melancholic moods were, in fact, engaged in a lifelong struggle with manic-depressive illness.

Manic-depressive illness, a surprisingly common disease, is genetically transmitted. For the first time, the extensive family histories of psychiatric illness and suicide in many writers, artists, and composers are presented. In some instances — for example, Tennyson and Byron — these psychiatric pedigrees are traced back more than 150 years. Jamison discusses the complex ethical and cultural consequences of recent research in genetics, especially as they apply to manic-depressive illness, a disease that almost certainly confers both individual and evolutionary advantages, but often kills and destroys as it does so.

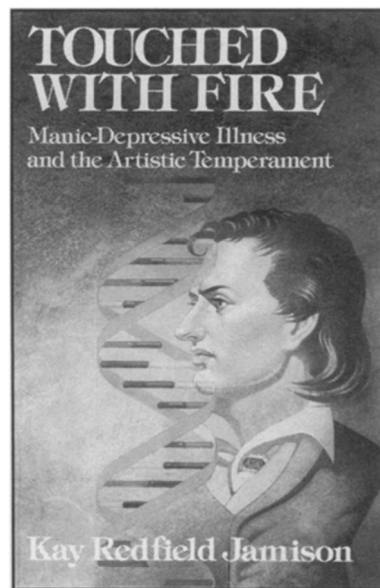
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