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Cover: Though considered silent residents of a forest, trees actually carry out inaudible conversations. Tropical biologists are learning how these dialogues, as well as tussles with other organisms, reshape treetops. (Aerial photo: Carl C. Hansen, Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History, Washington, D.C.)

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Science Service, which publishes SCIENCE NEWS, is a nonprofit corporation founded in 1921. It gratefully accepts tax-deductible contributions and bequests to assist its efforts to increase the public understanding of science, with special emphasis on young people. More recently, it has included in its mission increasing scientific literacy among members of underrepresented groups. Through its Youth Programs it administers the International Science and Engineering Fair, the Science Talent Search for the Westinghouse Science Scholarships, and publishes and distributes the *Directory of Student Science Training Programs for Precollege Students*.

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Letters

'Sticky foam' a sticky subject

The article on Sandia National Laboratories' "sticky foam" (SN: 6/18/94, p.390) was quite disturbing. Chlorofluorocarbons are known to damage the ozone layer and exacerbate global warming, and their use is being phased out under the Montreal Protocol. So why are federally funded engineers working to invent new uses for them?

Any benefits to law enforcement from the sticky foam surely would be more than offset by the environmental damage they would create, to say nothing of the waste-disposal problem they would present!

Michael Sklar
Ann Arbor, Mich.

An unbuyable bicarb

"Bicarb spares old bones" (SN: 6/25/94, p.405) made my husband and me curious to know what *potassium bicarbonate* is and how it may be obtained. Our pharmacist looked in every large directory he had and could not find

any such compound listed as being commercially available.

If it is as effective in halting or reversing loss of bone in postmenopausal women as it was reported to be, I (along with thousands of others) would like to get some! Is it approved for use? If so, where is it available?

Kay Richter
Milwaukee, Wis.

The potassium bicarbonate used is not available in the United States. The team we reported on imports it from overseas and is allowed to use it only for experimental studies.

— J. Raloff

Determining consciousness

"The Conscious Mind" (SN: 7/2/94, p.10) offers a fascinating glimpse into Karen Ann Quinlan's life and the chemistry of consciousness. The metaphor of Descartes' thought that the pineal gland housed consciousness rather leads the article to conclude that perhaps the thalamus is its actual "location."

And yet I wonder. If the thalamus is simply and only a switching station — such that

nothing goes in or out to *indicate* consciousness — might that mean that Quinlan was conscious, just trapped inside her head with her own thoughts, memories, and dreams? Were there any brain scans that might have been able to indicate that conscious thought processes (signs of intellect as opposed to bodily function) were occurring? Further, it sounds as if she was a good candidate for a fetal brain tissue implant into the thalamus (when and if that is approved).

Perhaps there is a glimmer of hope for others like Karen Ann Quinlan if it turns out that she was conscious, only incapable of demonstrating it.

James David Jones
Sewanee, Tenn.

Address communications to:
Editor, SCIENCE NEWS
1719 N Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036
All letters subject to editing.

SEPTEMBER 10, 1994

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