The Weekly Newsmagazine of Science

Science Service Publication Volume 146, No. 13, September 24, 1994

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SCIENCE NEWS (ISSN 0036-8423) is published weekly on Saturday, except the last week in December, for \$44.50 for 1 year or \$78.00 for 2 years (foreign postage \$6.00 additional per year) by Science Service, Inc., 1719 N Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036. Second-class postage paid at Washington, D.C., and additional mailing office. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Science News, P.O. Box 1925, Marion, Ohio 43305. Change of address: Four to six weeks' notice is required — old and new addresses, including zip codes, must be provided.

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1719 N St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036 (202-785-2255)

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Subscription Department:

PO. Box 1925, Marion, Ohio 43305 For new subscriptions only, call 1-800-247-2160. For customer service, call 1-800-347-6969. **This Week**

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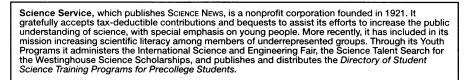
202 Prying into Prions

Cover: This computer image models the innocuous structure of a prion protein. Interactions between particular amino acids (green) help maintain this twisting conformation. Disruption of these interactions can lead to an infectious agent capable of destroying brain tissue. (Image: Z. Huang et al. PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES)

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No apocalypse now?
The report of the debate between Michaels, Singer, and Knappenberger and Kerr and McElroy concerning the putative 35 percent per year increase in wintertime ultraviolet (UV) radiation from 1989 to 1993 ("Tangling over Toronto's ozone," SN: 7/23/94, p.61) overlooks an important point.

As Kerr and McElroy are careful to point out in their original paper in SCIENCE (11/12/93, p.1034), "The observed, large increases in UV-B radiation near 300 nm in winter are large fractional increases in small values." A look at one of the figures in that paper reveals that their 35 percent per year increase amounts to a total change in the wintertime integrated radiation flux over 5 years of about 0.005 joule per square meter per day. The normal seasonal change in the flux at 300 nm is shown to be about 0.1 joule per square meter per day, or an increase each year from winter to summer of about 5,000 percent.

Placed in this perspective, Kerr and

McElroy's 5-year wintertime trend in harmful UV radiation "bathing Toronto" not only becomes less dramatically apocalyptic, it borders on the trivial.

Kennedth M. Towe Department of Paleobiology Smithsonian Institution Washington, D.C.

Solar UV peaks at solar noon, not necessarily at noon standard time. Depending on the longitude and time of the year, solar noon and standard clock noon can differ by as much as an hour or so.

> Forrest M. Mims III Seguin, Texas

Analyzing avoirdupois

Recent reports concerning the surprising increase in the number of overweight Americans ("U.S. Adults: A weighty lot," SN: 7/23/94, p.53) seem to ignore the dramatic changes in the U.S. diet over the same period as a possi-

The desire to reduce cholesterol and fats in general has led to an increase in overall carbohydrate consumption. While fats have more than double the calories of carbohydrates per given unit, they are also more satiating. Carbohydrates, on the other hand, can cause the release of insulin, lowering blood sugar concentrations and stimulating appetite.

With this in mind, the increase in overweight Americans is not all that surprising.

Mitchell Carucci

Great Neck, N.Y.

Might not the "surprise weight gain" be directly related to the fact that the last decade has ushered in the beginning of the end of the love affair between Americans and tobacco? Smoking keeps the average person 8 to 10 pounds lighter.

Jolene D. Huffman Jacksonville, Fla.

Studies that controlled for smoking have found it didn't explain increases in the number of overweight people.

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