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This Week

- 132 Must Babies Go on Low-Fat Diets Too?
- 132 Virus may trigger some mood disorders
- 133 Flying observatory seeks intergalactic gas
- 133 Ruminations on how enzymes evolved
- 134 Deep heat unites the volcanoes of Europe
- 134 Jamming prostate cancer's transmission
- 135 People with HIV get immune-reviving drug
- 135 Origins of life: Keys to an early chemical

Research Notes

- 138 AAAS
- 143 AAAS
- 143 Earth Science

Articles

136 Bacterial Chatter

Cover: Faced with starvation, bacterial colonies can spread out into elaborate networks. The colonies' intricate patterns reveal clues as to how the microorganisms may communicate with one another. In this photograph, a bacterial colony branches out, then curls into chiral tendrils. (Photo: Eshel Ben-Jacob *et al.*)

140 The Codemart Catalog

Departments

- 131 Letters
- 130 Books

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

Alternative reading

I call to your attention two books in the Science News Books Holiday Gift Collection 1994 brochure (SN: 11/19/94, p. 335). Neither contains accurate information.

The Complete Medicinal Herbal by Penelope Ody proposes as its theme that certain herbs may be used for medicinal purposes. Although this is true in undeveloped countries, the dangers of using them far outweigh the benefits. The example given of *ma huang* is typical. Deaths have been reported from heart stimulation because of the ephedrine-like compounds in the herb.

The major reason medicinal herbs are either dangerous or ineffective is that for many of them the claims are simply untrue, and for others, although active ingredients are present, their dosages cannot be controlled.

The other book is *Natural Alternatives to Over-the-Counter and Prescription Drugs* by Michael T. Murray. There is no scientific

validity to naturopathy or to the claims for herbs, vitamins, and other products that go with the practice.

I wish to suggest that you list such books as *The Health Robbers* by Steven Barrett and William Jarvis, "Alternative" in *Health Care, a Comprehensive Guide* by Jack Raso, and *A Consumers Guide to "Alternative Medicine,"* by Kurt Butler.

Wallace Sampson
San Jose, Calif.

Tried and true

As a family physician who practiced from 1947 to 1988, I wish to address "Middle Ear Infections in Children" (SN: 11/19/94, p.332).

When I was growing up in the 1920s, there were constantly some kids in the neighborhood who had cotton wads in their ears to soak up the malodorous, purulent discharge from their otitis media. Radical mastoidectomy, frequently with facial paralysis, was a common surgical procedure in the ENT [ear,

nose, throat] field. Meningitis and brain abscesses were not rare.

After sulfonamides were introduced in the late 1930s and penicillin in the early 1940s, ear infections were cleared up medically, and mastoidectomies became rare.

I realize that what I have written is anecdotal, but I firmly believe that the practical value of antibiotics in middle ear infections of children was proven — and the issue laid to rest — 50 years ago.

Leo Lewin
Mount Arlington, N.J.

Proverbial science?

When I read "Depressed to the bone . . ." (SN: 11/26/94, p.360), a Bible text that I memorized in my youth popped into my head. "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine, but a broken spirit drieth the bones" (Proverbs 17:22).

Maybe this isn't such a new discovery after all!
Shirley Cody
Portland, Ore.

MARCH 4, 1995

131