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Cover: In 1822, French zoologist Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire wrote an essay proposing that the body plan of vertebrates is a flipped-over version of the arthropod body plan. To establish that point, he dissected a lobster and included these drawings of its main body systems in his essay. Though his odd concept has largely been mocked, modern scientists studying developing embryos have now revived it. (Original drawings obtained by Edwin L. Ferguson from the University of Chicago; photo illustration by Mark Gilvey/Design Imaging)



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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

Diabetes in pregnancy isn't normal

I did a doubletake while reading "Pregnancy increases risk of diabetes" (SN: 6/17/95, p.383).

It says in the article that "...women who became pregnant again were more than twice as likely to develop type II diabetes as their counterparts who didn't have another child. Their risk was three times that of normal women."

Are you implying that pregnant women aren't normal? Don't you mean that their risk was three times that of a nonpregnant woman?

Lynne M. Clos
Boulder, Colo.

No. All of the women in this study had suffered from gestational diabetes. The "normal women" referred to are women who had never had this disorder.
— L. Seachrist

Conflicting 'facts' about radon

Two articles, one in SCIENCE NEWS (6/17/95, p.383) and one in CONSUMER REPORTS (July 1995, p.464), both scientific in nature, report diametrically opposing facts about radon. The SCIENCE NEWS article, from the JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL CANCER INSTITUTE, says that radon is no more harmful to children than adults and that nonsmokers are much more likely than smokers to acquire cancer from radon gas inhalation. The CONSUMER REPORTS article says just the opposite.

We, the public, are thrown into a mess where we don't know what to believe! Can you please clarify these issues?

Ed Clark
Elko, Nev.

One of the things that made the JNCI analysis important to cover was precisely these new findings, which contradict those of earlier studies. Most likely the analysis wasn't available when CONSUMER REPORTS prepared its story.
— J. Raloff

Doubts decoder works first

Is there really a school of thought which claims that a grammar decoder functions first, to the exclusion of all other mental procedures, in the interpretation of an utterance ("Understanding speech: I see what you mean," SN: 6/17/95, p.373)? Some psycholinguists may believe this is true of Chomsky's theory of autonomous syntax, which posits an independently operating grammar in each language user's mind.

According to Chomsky's theory, this grammar is involved in the understanding of all utterances, regardless of other cognitive operations, such as vision. However, the claim that autonomous syntax has some sort of chronological primacy is certainly not Chomsky's, though it is a common misperception among those who don't understand his theory of grammar.

Arguing against this straw man is not worthwhile and has no scientific value.

Gary Gilligan
Seattle, Wash.