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Cover: The wings of this *Morpho achilles* from the Amazon rain forest in Rondonia, Brazil, display the blue iridescence that makes these butterflies so striking in appearance. Inspired by such sights, researchers are studying how microscopic particles can assemble themselves into structures that exhibit a similar iridescence. (Photo: Thomas C. Emmel/University of Florida)

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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

FDA nixes new use of bone drug

Concerning the article "New Drug Staves Off Osteoporosis" (SN: 6/24/95, p.388), the good news came 5 years ago and concerned a drug already on the market.

Another phosphonic acid derivative, etidronate, was approved by the Food and Drug Administration and marketed before 1988 for the treatment of two diseases of bone metabolism. Etidronate was also shown by 1990 to be effective for the reversal of osteoporosis.

Leonard Stoloff
Delray Beach, Fla.

While etidronate has been shown to stabilize bone density, no studies yet have indicated that it reduces the number of fractures. Furthermore, etidronate has been associated with impaired bone mineralization in animal stud-

ies, which might mean bones become more fragile over time.

Finally, an FDA advisory committee recently reviewed all available data on etidronate and declined to approve it for the treatment or prevention of osteoporosis. It concluded that the research conducted so far had not demonstrated that etidronate was "safe and effective" for osteoporosis, according to an FDA spokesperson.

— J. Travis

Nitrate puzzle

I was puzzled by your statement that there is no simple method for removing nitrates from drinking water ("Feeding microbes to get rid of nitrates," SN: 7/15/95, p.39).

We live on reclaimed farmland that has well water in the range of 15 to 20 milligrams of nitrate nitrogen per liter. We use a cation exchange resin commonly available from water treatment companies that very effectively removes all nitrates from our well

water and softens it as well. There is a salt brine tank that backflushes the resin to "clean" it of contaminants periodically. We check the nitrate nitrogen concentrations with a small test kit.

Why would anyone suggest that oil-fed microbes be used for this purpose?

Rob Walty
Gaithersburg, Md.

Although there do exist methods for solving small-scale nitrate problems, there has been no easy, economical approach for large-scale or more serious ones.

—T. Adler

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