

Dr. Seeker's Future Imperfect

A sneak peek at what science will really look like in 25 years

As told to BRUCE BOWER

Hello, and welcome to my laboratory. I'm Dr. Seeker, but please call me Grant. Excuse the haze around here. You get used to it in this line of research. I'm a cryptoneuropodiologist—I study the effects of foot odors on the brain.

Want to grab some lunch? Nothing for me, thanks. I'm queasy from this morning's study of maze learning in rats forced to sniff sneakers worn by Olympic marathon runners. Today, I'll prognosticate rather than masticate.

Here are my humble predictions of the major scientific accomplishments in 2022, when SCIENCE NEWS celebrates its centennial:

- Physicists confirm the theory of Schrödinger's cat, which posits that an animal can be dead and alive at the same time, in particle-accelerator tests conducted on a random sample of government bureaucrats.

- Scientists design a computerized robot that thinks and speaks at the level of a 12-year-old child. They name it Web Headley. President Bill Gates appoints Web to his cabinet as Secretary of the Internet. Vice President Al Gore tries to teach Web the macarena.

- Welcome to the wonderful world of virtual dentistry, where you can ride the space shuttle past Saturn or navigate the rapids of a raging river during a root canal. Virtual adventurers are still advised to pack Novocain.

- Separate research teams simultaneously locate a gene for humility. Each team claims to have found the unassuming piece of DNA first and accuses the other of scientific fraud.

- SETI, the search for extraterrestrial intelligence, yields its first payoff when a radio transmission from beyond the solar system reaches Earth. Scientists decipher the message as follows: "What are your universal coordinates?" and "Why do we keep getting mail from Ed McMahon?"

- Modern-day alchemists announce that they've discovered a way to create the world's most precious metal out of thin air at room temperature. Controversy rages over the legitimacy of gold fusion.

- Cognitive neuroscientists devise a remote-control "brain beanie" that transmits information on cerebral activity as a person moves about freely. This leads to new insights into group differences in nervous system function, thanks to a brain-beanie study of certified public accountants and Soul Train dancers.

- Nanotechnology marches on with the introduction of nanonukes, microscopic nuclear reactors that can supply all the energy needs of an entire city block or rural town. Nanonuke facilities present certain dangers—ground vibrations emanating from nearby rock music clubs or taverns can set off nanoexplosions, usually around closing time. Scientists

are also developing nanocannisters to safely store radioactive nanowaste without attracting the attention of squirrels.

- Neuroscientists uncover the brain mechanisms that foster multiple personalities, but they remain unable to explain why Frank Gifford has no personality (and still anchors Monday Night Football).

- Scarcity of money for basic science research causes the federal government to replace peer review with an annual anything-goes mud-wrestling extravaganza. The last person standing in a group of competitors gets his or her project funded. Senior researchers designate the burliest postdocs they can find to slog it out in a mud pit set up across the street from the White House.

- Linguists use a computer model to reconstruct the way people spoke 20,000 years ago and get a surprising mouthful. Of particular interest are a bevy of Stone Age curses and put-downs, including "May a woolly mammoth soil your rock shelter," "Your breath scares off hungry cave bears," and "The Sky Gods writhe at the sight of your face."

- Medical researchers concoct a drug that cures the common cold. Unfortunately, it has side effects that would put a case of prune juice to shame.

- Discoverers of the spherical chemical structures known as buckyballs, or buckminsterfullerenes, in honor of Buckminster Fuller identify carbon atoms that form pairs of resilient, branching columns. The scientists christen these antlerlike arrays bullwinklenes.

- Genetic engineers delight mothers everywhere by designing a strain of broccoli that tastes like French fries and a type of Brussels sprouts flavored like chocolate bon-bons. The gene tweekers also create a DNA recipe for cucumber patties, crunchy green disks with a smoky hamburger flavor. In the works: rack of lima beans and eggplant steaks.

- Anthropologists reignite the nature-nurture debate when they locate a New Guinea tribe in which traditional sex roles are reversed. Women hunt, monopolize decision making, and spend nights in female-only huts, where they lie about the number of men who have fathered their children; men gather berries, cook, and try in vain to get their wives to talk about their feelings. Even more intriguing, 3- to 5-year-old girls fidget constantly and make loud sounds with their mouths and armpits; same-age boys comb one another's hair and have trouble throwing objects overhand.

- The discovery of Albert Einstein's lost notebook yields new insights into the great scientist's philosophical views. For example, in the margin next to the famous dictum "God does not play dice with the universe" is this notation: "But He occasionally racks up the planets for a game of billiards."

Come back anytime—I charge a lot less than the Psychic Friends Network. And remember the official cryptoneuropodiology motto, "Keep one foot in the future, no matter how it smells!" □



Illustrations: Paul Butler

