

This Week

- 356 Ancient Skull Fills Big Fossil Gap
Bruce Bower
- 356 Small comet theory melts under scrutiny
Richard Monastersky
- 357 Hubble takes first image of possible planet
Ron Cowen
- 358 Atomic faces peek through lead shroud
Peter Weiss
- 358 Picturing pesticides' impacts on kids
Janet Raloff
- 359 Red-flashing fish have chlorophyll eyes
Susan Milius
- 359 Survey finds wide resistance to TB drugs
Nathan Seppa
- 359 New spermicides stop cells gently
Corinna Wu

Articles

- 360 Melanoma Madness
The scientific flap over sunscreens and skin cancer
Kathleen Fackelmann
Corinna Wu
- 366 Ka-Boom!
A shockingly unconventional meat tenderizer
Janet Raloff

Letters

Science in the courtroom

"Courting Reliable Science" (SN: 4/18/98, p. 249) gives scant attention to what causes the problem of junk science: the economics of the legal industry.

The cases typically involve lawsuits against companies with "deep pockets." Total costs of litigation to all parties substantially exceed actual payments to the "victims." The system allows lawyers to use every possible legal tactic to promote their case: delay, obfuscation, distortion, suppression of unfavorable information, questionable experts, and so on. With few exceptions, these tactics generate added fees for the lawyers using them or for the other side's lawyers.

The final cost of the process is astronomical and produces decisions often indistinguishable from random. While the situation is obviously a magnet for scoundrels, many lawyers are honest and hardworking and struggle daily with these issues.

We need to stop making lawyer jokes and recognize that this systemic problem exerts

a massively negative economic impact. Given the legal industry's close ties with government, perhaps more leadership needs to come from science and academia.

Adam L. Carley
Windham, N.H.

The view of science as "an unending search for explanations" that allows "the luxury of putting off a conclusion to await further research" is an overly academic one. In particular, scientists working in industry must routinely make irrevocable decisions based on the limited data available at the moment.

Maybe we should look to the industrial scientist, rather than the science professor, for an appropriate model of the scientific expert.

Randall Marrett
Assistant Professor of Structural Geology
University of Texas
Austin, Texas

To be meaningful, scientific testimony requires jurors who are capable of understanding it; expert witnesses who do not carry on

so long, or in such detail, that they stupefy even jurors who can understand it; unbiased jurors with no ax to grind; and jurors who weigh the scientific arguments at least as much as they weigh the emotional appeals.

K.A. Boriskin
Bellingham, Mass.

Longer half-life for titanium-44

I read your article on the half-life of titanium-44 ("A half-life for titanium," SN: 4/25/98, p. 271). The question as to the actual value of this half-life has been of much current interest. In fact, in addition to the two articles you referred to, our group just published a paper reporting a value of 62 ± 2 years for its half-life.

Our paper was submitted prior to those two and appeared in the April PHYSICAL REVIEW C.

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Letters continued on p. 365

Research Notes

- 364 Biology
Plasmas put the hurt on microbes
Foxy fungi tarnish old books
Bacterial gene makes the sun fun again
Sheep bacteria widen diet of cattle
Ahh, the sweet smell of bacteria

Departments

- 354 Books
- 355 Letters



Cover: Sunscreens help prevent skin from burning, but do they protect against skin cancer? Scientists are trying to find out through epidemiological and chemical studies. There's no definitive answer yet, but research does suggest safe sun strategies.
Page 360

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