to the editor

Wall or membrane

A great deal of praise to SCIENCE NEWS for publishing an outstanding magazine. As a high school teacher of biology I find it invaluable.

I have one comment however. Please explain why your writers insist on referring to the living outer limits of cells as "cell walls." I have in mind specifically "Frontier: Genetic Control" (SN: 7/9, p. 118) where the statement is made ". . . mammalian enzymes are located in specific places such as the wall, mitochondria or ribosomes." I have noticed similar uses of the words "cell wall" in previous issues. As far as I know the correct use of the term "cell wall" is when it refers to nonliving structures which may be present in addition to cell membranes such as the cellulose plant cell wall. I believe the correct connotation should be "cell membrane" or "plasma membrane" instead of cell wall.

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(Technically, the point is well taken. Plants and bacteria have walls. Mammalian cells have membranes, though no surrounding cell wall. However, in conversation the term is frequently used by researchers describing their work. Frequently, "wall" is used on the theory that it is a simpler term than "membrane" and conveys an image membrane does not, but strictly speaking cell membrane is accurate. Ed.)

Technology assessment

I feel you somewhat overstressed the negative side of our report ("For Technology Assessment," SN: 9/6, p. 177). There were a number of places where we pointed out the importance of assessing the potential of neglected technologies as well as anticipating the negative side-effects of existing or prospective technologies. It is certainly wrong to state that we weighed in on the negative side of the scale; we tried very hard to steer a middle course. It is not technology which is responsible for many of our problems, but the application of technology within the limited criterion of economic efficiency without reference to other values or objectives.

I also take exception to your equating technology assessment with technological forecasting. In fact we made a careful effort to distinguish between the two and indeed took a rather dim view of technological forecasting as a useful tool for technology assessment. It is true that technology assessment requires projection of alternative possibilities for the future, but it is more concerned with selection among such possibilities than with attempting to forecast which will come about. In fact, the term technological forecasting conveys an impression of the inevitability of the consequences of technology with which our panel emphatically disagreed. Society now has the tools with which it can guide and select technology. Science has given us a much larger menu of alternative techologies than ever before and the knowledge to select among them to achieve desired goals. This was really the thrust of our report.

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