

MEDICINE

Watermelon Sound of Skull Gives New Test

► A "WATERMELON sound" from the skull when the examining doctor taps gives a new diagnostic sign of overactive parathyroid glands in the neck, Dr. Frederick A. Fender of Stanford University School of Medicine, San Francisco, reports in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (Jan. 27).

Dr. Fender discovered the new sign because he is "a creature of habit." He had been asked to make a neurological survey of a woman who had lost the ability to walk, with the object of learning what nerve involvement might be causing her trouble.

Following habit, Dr. Fender reports that he started with percussion, or tapping, of her head. Instead of the "high-pitched crack" that would come from a normal adult skull, he heard a booming, low-pitched note that reminded him of the sound made by tapping on a watermelon.

Later it was found that the patient had overactive parathyroid glands that were causing her trouble. Subsequent tests of other patients showed that the watermelon sound is diagnostic of this gland disturbance.

Science News Letter, April 3, 1954

VITAL STATISTICS

Accidental Poisoning More Likely for Males

► MORE MALES than females die of accidental poisoning, statisticians of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in New York report.

This is true for every age group, although the death rate from accidental poisoning is highest among children of preschool age and grown-ups in middle life.

Bichloride of mercury and other mercury compounds, arsenic, strychnine and lye have dropped off as accidental poison killers. Barbituric acid and its derivatives, known generally as sleeping pills, now head the list of poisons responsible for accidental deaths in the United States.

Alcohol, mostly wood and denatured alcohol, ranks second.

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BIOLOGY

NATURE RAMBLINGS

Porcupine

► THE ACHILLES' heel of the porcupine is its soft underbelly. A deft predator that has learned to respect the formidable armament of the porcupine can flip the prickly creature onto its back and quickly kill it.

But the hunter whose training in woodland tactics is deficient on this particular point is in for a lesson it will not soon forget. However big or ferocious it be, whether bear or mountain lion, wolf or fox, lynx or coyote, it makes no difference. To attack a porcupine from the prickly side is at least sharply painful, and at worst deadly fatal. And, the belly excepted, all sides are prickly.

Unmolested, porcupines are docile, harmless creatures. They waddle along the ground or climb slowly in trees preoccupied with the search for bark, mistletoe, and other vegetative delicacies. They are not meat eaters. But if an enemy appears before the safety of den or tree can be reached, the porcupine bristles. The long, strong, sharp quills which cover its body from head to tail, stand out from the body, like pins in a pin-cushion with the pointed ends out.

The porcupine takes a position with its tail to its foe, and as the puzzled would-be attacker circles looking for some place to catch hold of its prey, the porcupine shuffles around to keep its tail pointed to the

intruder. If the latter is foolish enough to lunge to the attack, the porcupine delivers a powerful upward blow with its tail, driving quills into the attacker's chin and throat, and at the same time guiding the attacker's mouth and face into the thicket of quills on its back.

The quills are as much as five inches long and barbed. It takes a man with pliers to pull one out. An animal cannot remove them unaided. They work their way in deeper and deeper. Experts disagree on how serious these quill wounds are. Some believe they can lead to death, either from starvation resulting from quills in the mouth, making eating impossible, or else from the eventual penetration of a quill to some vital part. Others think the quills are absorbed eventually by the body tissues, causing pain but no serious harm.

It is popularly thought that porcupines throw their quills like darts in self-defense. Zoologists who have studied the matter think that strictly speaking this is not so. Quills are constantly growing, being lost, and growing in again. The older quills are quite loose. It sometimes happens that a disturbed porcupine will flip up its tail and a loose quill will fly off. The odds against such a flying quill hitting a target, to say nothing of sticking into it, are very slim.

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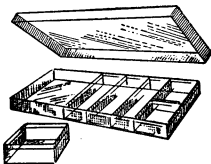
METEOROLOGY

Appoint Head of Unit For Computer Forecasts

► THE WEATHER Bureau's new unit to try out weather forecasting by giant "brain" will be headed by Dr. George P. Cressman, now of the Air Force's Air Weather Service at Andrews Air Force Base, Camp Springs, Md.

The group expects to start operating on July 1, although Dr. Cressman does not yet know where the computer, now on order, will be set up. The unit will be the first to test a computer in day-to-day wind predictions and will be operated jointly by the Weather Bureau, Navy and Air Force. (See SNL, Nov. 14, 1953, p. 309.)

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