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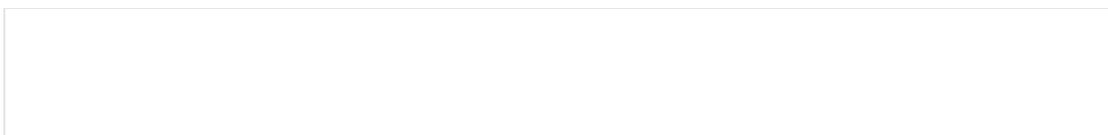
Readers Respond to "World Changing Ideas"

Letters to the editor from the December 2014 issue of Scientific American

April 1, 2015



December 2014



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CANCER TREATMENT IN SENIORS

As a bioethicist, a 67-year-old and a liberal, I find "Never Too Old for Chemo," by Claudia Wallis [The Science of Health], a welcome and long overdue antidote to the conventional wisdom that it is best for sick old people to bow out quickly, gracefully and inexpensively. (You bet I'll opt for aggressive treatment if I get cancer when I'm 100!)

Yet I'm uneasy about considering such factors as "social support" in determining which elderly patients should be eligible for chemotherapy. Doing so risks discriminating against patients who lack families—or whose families would prefer that their old folk be "allowed" to die even if they want to live.

FELICIA NIMUE ACKERMAN

Brown University

I would say that deciding whether to opt in to, or out of, aggressive therapies such as chemotherapy to treat cancer would greatly depend on what type of malignancy a person has. Wallis's father-in-law, whom she describes as deciding against treatment, had what most people would consider a "certain death sentence": advanced, metastatic pancreatic cancer. Two other elders described in the article, who decided to fight, respectively, bladder cancer and lymphoma, were, it is hoped, not coerced by family members or physicians.

There are cancers that can be fought with chemotherapy, at any age, but many factors have to be weighed.

GORDON W. REITER

Sedona, Ariz.

POLICE BODY CAMS

In "Caution: Cops with Cameras," the editors warn that further planning and research should precede more police departments adopting body cameras to record encounters between their officers and the public.

I think helpful information could be gleaned from the Federal Aviation Administration on the effects, bad and good, of workers and their charges being monitored. Airline pilots and air-traffic controllers may

have their words recorded and stored for a while in the event that something happens. In addition, pilots have a "black box" watching their control inputs, and controllers may have their radar scopes recorded.

Because this approach seems to be fairly new to police departments, perhaps it would help for the faa to share any information that might be useful.

JEFF OTTAWAY

Retired air-traffic controller via e-mail

RESEARCH ETHICS

In discussing the new DNA-editing technique CRISPR in "[The Gene Genie](#)," Margaret Knox describes ethical concerns about the technology. These concerns can be extrapolated to a significant issue with research in general: that we must be mindful of ethical, legal and social implications.

Most scientific endeavors can have positive or negative applications but often just have ethically agnostic ones. Yet the typical ex post facto, knee-jerk, reactionary rules to regulate these endeavors—commonly based solely on fears of misuse—are at best misguided and are, in many instances, actually detrimental to the promotion of science.

As such, these issues should be brought up early in the course of basic science research and the development of new technologies. Any subsequent resulting restrictions on science and technology ought to always be balanced against the real possibility of impeding those innovations.

DOV GREENBAUM

Yale University School of Medicine Director, Zvi Meitar Institute for Legal Implications of Emerging Technologies, Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, Israel

CONFIRMED CONSPIRACY

The problem with Michael Shermer's Skeptic column "[Conspiracy Central](#)" is that it treats all "conspiracy theories" as roughly equal and implies that anybody who lends credence to even one such "theory"

must have deep psychological problems. It certainly couldn't be because there might be actual evidence to support the conclusion that a conspiracy of some kind exists.

Regarding the events of 9/11, I would point out that the official version of what happened must be considered a "conspiracy theory." It has all four necessary elements that Shermer himself quotes from Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent's book on the subject: "(1) A group (2) acting in secret (3) to alter institutions ... (4) at the expense of the common good."

Whether Shermer subscribes to the official 9/11 story or the "inside job" account, he must be a conspiracy theorist himself!

YOLANDA DEBYLE

via e-mail

SHERMER REPLIES: Yes, the al Qaeda conspirators who plotted in secret to fly planes into buildings constitutes a conspiracy, but only one of the conspiracy theories about 9/11 is true, which is that Osama bin Laden and Khalid Sheik Mohammed acted without the knowledge of or assistance from the Bush administration.

The conspiracy theory that 9/11 was an inside job has been thoroughly debunked not only by Skeptic magazine (search "9/11" at Skeptic.com) but by al Qaeda itself, which boasted that it did it and that it would do it again elsewhere.

UNBEARABLE FRUIT

Stephani Sutherland's article on chronic "Pain That Won't Quit" reminded me of a problem I had 30 years ago. My feet were in constant pain. Doctors were not very helpful, and I thought that it was because I was running a mile or so every morning.

What I found out was that it was because of eating fruit: I drank a glass of orange juice every morning. When I went on a trip for a week and didn't drink juice, my feet quit hurting. When I tried drinking it again, the pain would come back. Other fruits such as strawberries cause problems for me, too. So the pain other people get might be from something they eat or drink.

PAUL HART

via e-mail

ERRATA

"Transparent Organisms," by Ryan Bradley [World Changing Ideas], incorrectly states that Viviana Gradinaru and her colleagues did work on replacing lipid molecules in tissues to make them transparent in the laboratory of the late neuroimmunologist Paul Patterson at the California Institute of Technology. The work was performed at neuroscientist Karl Deisseroth's lab at Stanford University.

"Taking the Sting Out of Pain," by Mark Peplow, which is an accompanying sidebar to "Pain That Won't Quit," by Stephani Sutherland, erroneously refers to the painkilling drug ziconotide as based on a molecule from the venomous cone snail species *Conus victoriae*. It was from another cone snail, *Conus magus*. The new research described in the article involves painkillers derived from *C. victoriae*.

CLARIFICATION

"The Jet Stream Is Getting Weird," by Jeff Masters, refers to Rossby waves as bends in the jet stream that typically progress across the U.S. in three to five days. Rather smaller-scale bends called short waves are embedded in the larger Rossby waves and progress in that time frame.

This article was originally published with the title "Letters"

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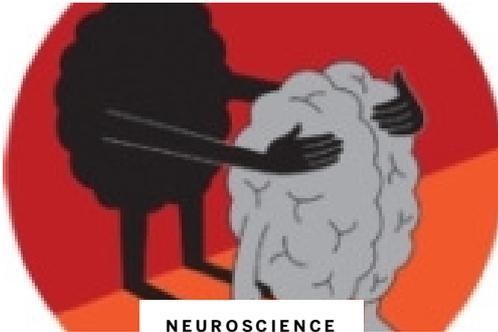
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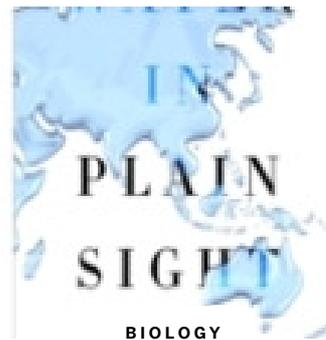
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