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"Current Comments"

Current Controversy

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Many controversies have been "created", in a sense, by scientific or technological advances: abortion, fluoridation of drinking water, "treatment" of criminals and psychiatric patients, environmental effects of aerosol cans and nuclear reactors, and genetic engineering. Each has an impact on politics, religion and philosophy.

Without aseptic surgery and anesthesia, abortion would be difficult and dangerous. Without knowledge of the effects of fluoride on tooth enamel, of atmospheric hydrocarbons on the ozone layer, of quantum theory and of DNA-splicing, the problems mentioned above—which are certainly real and pressing—would not exist.

However, the problems solved by scientific advances are too easily forgotten as we focus attention on the 'side-effects' of the progress most people at first applauded. It is too simplistic to suggest a return to "organic" farming when artificial fertilizers and modern machinery have enabled 6% of the U.S. population to supply a substantial portion of the rest of the world's food supply.

Unfortunately, there is no general agreement with the proposition that more research and further scientific advances can surmount the "by-product" problems that have resulted from the so-called misuse of science. Sadly, science often finds itself characterized as the villain. In spite of this, scientists continue to collect data, formulate hypotheses, conduct experiments, and keep abreast of new developments in their fields. They accept this criticism from lay society because they know that even amongst themselves they cannot agree on the best possible course to recommend to society.

Making decisions which may affect the whole of society requires more than data, more than risk-benefit probabilities, more than knowledge. Such decisions are based on statistics *and* imagination, information *and* consensus, knowledge *and* values.

We believe that traditional scientific journals do not provide adequate opportunities for scientists and others to express values, imagination, and the type of discussion which leads to consensus. It is for this reason that

Current Controversy, a new section of *Current Contents*® devoted to discussion of contemporary scientific issues, will be introduced shortly. We invite your participation.

Current Controversy will seek to provide an alternative to the traditional scholarly journal, which tends to include only letters based on the lead articles contained in them. Without sacrificing scholarship, style, or good taste, we will encourage brevity and clarity in contributed essays. In some cases, referees or *Current Contents* editorial board members may be asked to review contributions or even provide different viewpoints. In this way, *Current Controversy* will provide counterpoint to the *ISI Press Digest*, in which we extract brief passages from the lay and scientific press in order to present the substance of ideas more fully developed in other publications. We always try to achieve a balanced presentation of opposing and complementary views.

If we can't find solutions to the problems we face through rational discussion, then others less rational may succeed with worse 'solutions' through our default.