LETTERS

EDITORIAL
Transition at the EPA: J. Schmandt

ARTICLES
Solar Chemistry of Metal Complexes: H. B. Gray and A. W. Maverick
Determination of Nucleotide Sequences in DNA: F. Sanger
Science, Technology, and the Limits of Judicial Competence: S. Jasanoff and D. Nelkin

NEWS AND COMMENT
OTA Predicts Growing Soviet Energy Trade
Scientist Convicted for Monkey Neglect
Cline Loses Two NIH Grants
Medfly Continues to Bug California
Briefing: U.S. Announces Pullout from IIASA in Vienna; Engineers Flee Academia; Aliens on the Campus
New Creationism Bill Already Drafted

RESEARCH NEWS
A New Wave of Antibiotics Builds
Cephalosporins Are Not the Only Answer
New Heart Attack Treatment Discussed

ANNUAL MEETING
AAAS Exhibit 1982
BOOK REVIEWS

Genes, Radiation and Society, reviewed by D. J. Kevles; Mammalian Genetics and Cancer, M. Potter; Interferons, J. Vilcek; Aging, J. W. Rowe; The Dynamics of Technical Controversy, R. H. Salisbury; Books Received ................................................................. 1232

REPORTS

Paleognathous Carinate Birds from the Early Tertiary of North America: P. Houde and S. L. Olson ................................................................. 1236

Adenosine 3',5'-Monophosphate Modulates Thyrotropin Receptor Clustering and Thyrotropin Activity in Culture: A. Avivi et al. ................................. 1237

Type III Hyperlipoproteinemia Associated with Apolipoprotein E Deficiency: G. Ghiselli et al. ................................................................. 1239

Intestinal Diffusion Barrier: Unstirred Water Layer or Membrane Surface Mucous Coat?: K. W. Smithson et al. ............................................. 1241

Integration and Stable Germ Line Transmission of Genes Injected into Mouse Pronuclei: J. W. Gordon and F. H. Ruddle ................................. 1244

High Levels of Intracellular Bombesin Characterize Human Small-Cell Lung Carcinoma: T. W. Moody et al. ..................................................... 1246

Novel Peptide Neuronal System in Rat Brain and Pituitary: E. Weber et al. ......................................................................................... 1248

Autoimmune Encephalomyelitis: Simultaneous Identification of T and B Cells in the Target Organ: U. Traugott et al. ............................................. 1251

Slow-Wave Sleep: A Recovery Period After Exercise: C. M. Shapiro et al. ......................................................................................... 1253


Disappearance of Stabilized Chromatic Gratings: D. H. Kelly ......................................................................................... 1257

Reversible Chemical Modification of the Scrapie Agent: M. P. McKinley, F. R. Maslack, S. B. Prusiner ......................................................................................... 1259

Neuroleptic Drug-Induced Dopamine Receptor Supersensitivity: Antagonism by l-Prolyl-l-Leucyl-Glycinamide: S. Chiu, C. S. Paulose, R. K. Mishra ......................................................................................... 1261

PRODUCTS AND MATERIALS

Hot Plate Oven; Laboratory Computer; Human Interferon; Balances; Pump; Image Analysis Software for Data Base Management; Gel Destainer/Agitator; Literature ......................................................................................... 1264

Cover

Skull of a paleognathous bird from the early Eocene of Wyoming, about 50 million years old. Somewhat older fossils from Montana also belong to this previously unknown group of medium-sized, flying birds. The ostrich-like palate of these birds is primitive and therefore cannot be used to define the ostrich-like birds (ratites) as a monophyletic group. See page 1236. [V. Krantz, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560]
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Transition at the EPA

A year after the elections the future of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and its priorities remain unclear. However, some indications may be gleaned from impending decisions by the EPA administrator on implementation of an agencywide strategy for the control of toxic substances. The strategy was developed over the course of the past year and is designed to be both scientifically sound and economically reasonable. The outcome will be of general interest, since the direction of environmental policy and the role of science in regulatory decision-making are at stake.

The need to place a higher priority on control of toxic pollutants in the environment was recognized by the Carter Administration. At the end of his term as EPA administrator, Douglas Costle spoke of a transition in environmental policy from control of conventional to toxic pollutants; this change would provide the major challenges for the agency in the 1980's and 1990's. Shortly before the elections, and prodded by the Office of Management and Budget, EPA began to analyze the regulatory and management implications of such a shift in priorities. The new Reagan team at EPA signaled initial approval of this approach and encouraged further development of the agencywide toxics strategy. For the first time in EPA's history, a scientist-engineer was appointed to the number two command spot.

Focusing attention and resources on risks from toxic substances will move EPA more directly into the orbit of public health policy. This makes it necessary to work closely with other public health agencies of the government on assessing risks and determining the relative seriousness of exposure from different sources, such as environment, workplace, diet, and other life-style factors. Work on an EPA cancer policy, which has been under way for some time, calls for cooperation of this kind.

Internally, the agency will need to move from a medium-specific and engineering perspective to a broad scientific and public health orientation. This will be difficult, partly because of the scientific and regulatory complexities of toxic control, partly for institutional reasons. Throughout EPA's history, individual program offices, in particular those responsible for air and water, have been the real power centers. Their principal regulatory approach was based on establishing pollutant standards. By contrast, the offices for pesticides and industrial chemicals are responsible for licensing commercial products once they have been found acceptable. Both strategies will have to be used as part of an integrated toxics control program; others will need to be developed, such as control programs for entire sectors of industry or geographic regions. Toxics control must, therefore, be organized as an agencywide function, establishing priorities for action, choosing the most appropriate intervention alternative, and making decisions in light of program views but not dominated by them.

A key ingredient for a successful toxics strategy is a vastly improved linkage between policy-making and science in the agency. The Office of Research and Development oversees a large research program and plays an important role in the preparation of science and health assessments. Some program offices have relied on the Office of Research and Development for these services, others conduct their own science assessments and bypass the agency's central science advisory mechanism. The result has been considerable duplication of effort, delays, and internal conflicts. The new toxics strategy emphasizes the importance of developing consistent procedures for collecting and analyzing scientific data and for submitting science assessments to outside peer review. Much of EPA's research will need to be more directly linked to regulatory needs. Policy-makers, on their part, need to engage in more sustained substantive dialogue with the experts.

In sum, an EPA-wide toxics strategy needs more central policy direction and oversight, less program independence, more cooperation with public health agencies, less emphasis on open-ended data collection, and more policy-relevant science.—JURGEN SCHMANDT, Professor of Public Affairs, University of Texas, Austin 78712