LETTERS

EDITORIAL
Glass Fiber Communication .......................................................... 463

ARTICLES
Selective Modification of Glutathione Metabolism: A. Meister .......................................................... 472
Mathematics and Science Learning: A New Conception: L. B. Resnick .......................................................... 477

NEWS AND COMMENT
"Baby Doe" Regs Thrown Out by Court .......................................................... 479
Navy Secretary Torpedoes a Think Tank .......................................................... 481
Study of Big Science Groups Hits Raw Nerve .......................................................... 482
Briefing: NRC Faults Utility, Delays Reactor Start-up; Ohio State's Telescope Given Stay of Execution; Communications Satellite Rescue in Real Jeopardy; Weather Satellite Sale Gets a Hearing; NSF Nominee Wins Committee Approval; Genentech Bows Out of NYU's Malaria Project .......................................................... 484
The Newly Improved MX Missile .......................................................... 486

RESEARCH NEWS
Dietary Dogma Disproved ........................................................................ 487
The Two Sides of the Brain ........................................................................ 488
Supersymmetry and Supergravity .................................................................... 491

BOOK REVIEWS
Gametes and Spores, reviewed by S. A. Roe; Resource Competition and Community Structure, M. Westoby; Cell Interactions and Development, R. B. Marchase; Books Received .......................................................... 494
Death of a Hadal Deep-Sea Bacterium After Decompression: A. A. Yayanos and A. S. Dietz ................................................................. 497


Modes of Larval Development and Rates of Speciation in Early Tertiary Neogastropods: T. A. Hansen ............................................ 501

Liposomal Blockade of the Reticuloendothelial System: Improved Tumor Imaging with Small Unilamellar Vesicles: R. T. Proffitt et al. 502

Hemagglutinin Variants of Reovirus Type 3 Have Altered Central Nervous System Tropism: D. R. Spriggs, R. T. Bronson, B. N. Fields 505

A Cytokinin (Isopentenyl-Adenosyl-Mononucleotide) Linked to Ecdysone in Newly Laid Eggs of Locusta migratoria: G. Tsourpas, B. Liu, J. A. Hoffmann ................................................................. 507

A Glycolipid Antigen Associated with Burkitt Lymphoma Defined by a Monoclonal Antibody: E. Nudelman et al. ............................... 509

Damselfish as Keystone Species in Reverse: Intermediate Disturbance and Diversity of Reef Algae: M. A. Hixon and W. N. Brostoff ................................................................. 511

Slow Compressional Wave Propagation in Wet Human and Bovine Cortical Bone: R. Lakes, H. S. Yoon, J. L. Katz .................................... 513

Cloned Fragment A of Diphtheria Toxin Is Expressed and Secreted into the Periplasmic Space of Escherichia coli K12: D. Leong, K. D. Coleman, J. R. Murphy ................................................................. 515

Platelet Thromboxane Synthetase Inhibitors with Low Doses of Aspirin: Possible Resolution of the "Aspirin Dilemma": V. Bertele et al. ............................... 517

Vasoactive Intestinal Polypeptide and Muscarinic Receptors: Supersensitivity Induced by Long-Term Atropine Treatment: R. Hedlund, J. Abens, T. Bartfai ............................... 519

Stimulation of Prostaglandin Biosynthesis by Urine of the Human Fetus May Serve as a Trigger for Parturition: D. M. Strickland et al. ......................................................... 521

Bovine x Mouse Hybridomas That Secrete Bovine Immunoglobulin G1: S. Srikumaran, A. J. Guidry, R. A. Goldsby ......................................................... 522

Selective Photothermolysis: Precise Microsurgery by Selective Absorption of Pulsed Radiation: R. R. Anderson and J. A. Parrish ......................................................... 524

Brief Deprivation of Vision After Unilateral Lesions of the Frontal Eye Field Prevents Contralateral Inattention: D. P. Crowne, C. M. Richardson, G. Ward ......................................................... 527

Spontaneous Orofacial Dyskinesia and Dopaminergic Function in Rats After 6 Months of Neuroleptic Treatment: J. L. Waddington et al. ......................................................... 530

Treehoppers Transfer Parental Care to Ants: A New Benefit of Mutualism: C. M. Bristow ................................................................. 532

Pregnancy Increases Reactivity of Mice to Phenobarbital: L. D. Middaugh, J. W. Zemp, W. O. Boggan ......................................................... 534

Synaptic Activity Mediates Death of Hypoxic Neurons: S. M. Rothman ................................................................. 536

COVER
Pseudocolor electron microscope tomograph displaying a 6-nanometer slice through a Balbiani ring gene transcription unit. The hexagonal pattern suggests a sixfold helical organization of nascent transcripts in situ. See page 498. [Donald E. Olins and Ada L. Olins, Oak Ridge Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, Oak Ridge, Tennessee 37830]
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Glass Fiber Communication

Rapid progress is being made in research, development, and applications related to glass fiber communication systems. A number of companies are active in this field, but at present the Bell System, including Bell Laboratories, is the leader. In February of this year, the Washington-New York link of its Northeast Corridor Lightwave Communication System became operational. Shortly thereafter, the Sacramento–San José link of a Sacramento–San Diego system was placed in service. The remaining links in both systems are under construction and will be completed in 1984 and 1985, respectively. The communication capabilities of the links in service are impressive, but recent disclosures of the progress of R & D indicate that the capabilities of fiber systems can be improved by orders of magnitude.

The Washington–New York link contains 30,000 miles of tiny glass fibers. Communication through the fibers is by means of light pulses generated by lasers that can turn on and off 90 million times a second. The fibers, consisting mainly of pure SiO2, transmit light with a wavelength of 1.3 micrometers. In repeater stations every 4 miles, light is converted to electric pulses that are amplified and then fed to lasers for injection of pulses into the next section of the line.

One measure of the capabilities of the existing systems is that a pair of fibers could transmit the entire Encyclopedia Britannica in 1 minute. But recent announcements make it evident that greater achievements will be forthcoming as a result of improvements in the fibers and especially in the lasers. The starting material for the fiber is a thick-walled tube of silica glass. During the manufacturing process, the tube is rotated while being heated. A mixture of SiCl4, GeCl4, and O2 is introduced into the hot tube and SiO2 and GeO2 are formed and deposited on the inner surface of the silica. With further heating, the tube collapses into a solid rod. Later, the rod is pulled out into fibers with an outer diameter of 100 micrometers. The inner core, with a diameter of 5 to 10 micrometers, has an index of refraction greater than the remainder of the fiber. Light transmitted along the fiber is confined to the core.

A key breakthrough has been the development at Bell Laboratories of lasers that emit light which is practically monochromatic and free of side bands. The speed of light is dependent on the wavelength. Confusing signals would reach the detector from a source having a number of lines. At a wavelength of 1.3 micrometers, the difference in velocity is minimal. Hence, the earlier systems employing lasers with side bands were designed to use that kind of light. However, the absorption curve of light in silica has a minimum at about 1.55 micrometers that is considerably lower than the minimum at 1.3 micrometers. Development of monochromatic lasers at 1.55 micrometers has opened that part of the spectrum for use in transmission.

With changes in the composition of the gallium-indium-arsenic-phosphorus lasers, the emitted wavelength can be controlled. In principle, it will be possible to transmit simultaneously hundreds of independent signals through a fiber. At the same time, the attenuation of the light with distance has decreased. This makes possible a much longer interval between repeater stations. Improvements in the lasers also make possible the use of shorter pulses. In one experiment conducted by Bell Laboratories, signals were successfully transmitted at the rate of 420 million per second through 73 miles of fiber with no intervening repeater stations.

Most of the equipment developed for long-distance transmission is applicable to local networks. Glass fiber loops have already been installed in a number of cities, including Los Angeles. With further R & D, costs will inevitably drop, and it will become practical to provide voice, data, and video services to offices, shops, and homes. Ian Ross, president of Bell Laboratories, has predicted that ultimately glass fibers carrying high-speed digital signals will make interactive video in color as widespread as today’s telephone service.—PHILIP H. ABELSON