

139 This Week in *Science*

Editorial

141 Fraud in Science

Letters

144 Misuse of the Freedom of Information Act: J. R. WILLIAMS ■ Rüdénberg's Patents: J. L. HUMMER ■ Quality of Biomedical Literature: R. G. MARTIN ■ Quantitative Risk Aspects of the "Woburn Case": M. T. SMITH ■ Moonlight and Circadian Rhythms: R. M. SINCLAIR; C. A. CZEISLER AND J. S. ALLAN ■ Research Practices: W. W. STEWART AND N. FEDER

News & Comment

151 Science Budget: More of the Same ■ R&D and the Deficit
153 Peer Review—'oops—Merit Review in for Some Changes at NSF
154 Cancer M.D.'s Clash over Interleukin Therapy
155 Landsat Commercialization Stumbles Again
156 Hazardous Waste: Where to Put It?
158 EEC Research Program in Jeopardy
159 Court Rejects Rifkin in Biotech Cases
Math Papers Called Inaccessible
Briefing: Comings and Goings

Research News

160 Oncogenes Give Breast Cancer Prognosis
161 Materials Scientists Seek a Unified Voice
163 Diabetics Should Lose Weight, Avoid Diet Fads ■ High-Carb Diets Questioned
165 Delving into Faults and Earthquake Behavior: How to Stop a Quake by Jogging ■ Earthquakes Are Giving Little Warning ■ Coastal Ups and Downs Point to a Big Quake ■ Cutting the Gordian Knot of the San Andreas

Articles

167 Community Diversity: Relative Roles of Local and Regional Processes: R. E. RICKLEFS
172 Band-Gap Engineering: From Physics and Materials to New Semiconductor Devices: F. CAPASSO
177 Human Breast Cancer: Correlation of Relapse and Survival with Amplification of the HER-2/*neu* Oncogene: D. J. SLAMON, G. M. CLARK, S. G. WONG, W. J. LEVIN, A. ULLRICH, W. L. MCGUIRE

Research Articles

182 The Atomic Structure of Mengo Virus at 3.0 Å Resolution: M. LUO, G. VRIEND, G. KAMER, I. MINOR, E. ARNOLD, M. G. ROSSMANN, U. BOEGE, D. G. SCRABA, G. M. DUKE, A. C. PALMENBERG

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COVER Lava flow after eruption of Mauna Loa Volcano, March 1984. Lava flows advanced nearly 20 kilometers in about 5 days toward the city of Hilo, largest city on the island of Hawaii. The flow slowed and stopped about 8 kilometers from nearest buildings on city's outskirts. All eruptive activity ceased by early April 1984. See page 196. [Scott Lopez, National Park Service]

Reports

- 193 Outward-Dipping Ring-Fault Structure at Rabaul Caldera as Shown by Earthquake Locations: J. MORI AND C. MCKEE
- 195 Sensory Tuning of Lateral Line Receptors in Antarctic Fish to the Movements of Planktonic Prey: J. C. MONTGOMERY AND J. A. MACDONALD
- 196 Disruption of the Mauna Loa Magma System by the 1868 Hawaiian Earthquake: Geochemical Evidence: R. I. TILLING, J. M. RHODES, J. W. SPARKS, J. P. LOCKWOOD, P. W. LIPMAN
- 199 Oxygen Supersaturation in the Ocean: Biological Versus Physical Contributions: H. CRAIG AND T. HAYWARD
- 202 Identification of a Juvenile Hormone-Like Compound in a Crustacean: H. LAUFER, D. BORST, F. C. BAKER, C. CARRASCO, M. SINKUS, C. C. REUTER, L. W. TSAI, D. A. SCHOOLEY
- 205 Evolution of Male Pheromones in Moths: Reproductive Isolation Through Sexual Selection?: P. L. PHELAN AND T. C. BAKER
- 207 Direct Activation of Mammalian Atrial Muscarinic Potassium Channels by GTP Regulatory Protein G_i : A. YATANI, J. CODINA, A. M. BROWN, L. BIRNBAUMER
- 211 Metalloregulatory DNA-Binding Protein Encoded by the *merR* Gene: Isolation and Characterization: T. O'HALLORAN AND C. WALSH
- 214 Nerve Growth Factor Treatment After Brain Injury Prevents Neuronal Death: L. F. KROMER
- 217 Lung Cancer and Indoor Air Pollution in Xuan Wei, China: J. L. MUMFORD, X. Z. HE, R. S. CHAPMAN, S. R. CAO, D. B. HARRIS, X. M. LI, Y. L. XIAN, W. Z. JIANG, C. W. XU, J. C. CHUANG, W. E. WILSON, M. COOKE
- 220 Preferred Microtubules for Vesicle Transport in Lobster Axons: R. H. MILLER, R. J. LASEK, M. J. KATZ

Book Reviews

- 224 The Darwinian Heritage, *reviewed by* A. DESMOND ■ Confronting Nature, Y. GINGRAS ■ Are Australian Ecosystems Different?, G. H. ORIANS ■ Under the Cloud and Justice Downwind, R. A. DIVINE ■ Books Received

Products & Materials

- 229 Portable Macroscopic ■ Diacylglycerol Kinase ■ Polyacrylamide Gels for Electrophoresis ■ FORTRAN Language Subroutines ■ PVC Tubing ■ Miniature Centrifuge ■ Teflon-Coated Slides ■ Literature

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Fraud in Science

Fraud in scientific research is unacceptable and inevitable. It is unacceptable because the entire procedure of publishing and advancing knowledge is based on trust—that the literature reports accurate measurements of actual experiments. If each researcher had to go back and repeat the literature, the enormously productive rush of modern science would slow to a snail's pace. Even good intentions are not enough. Sloppy experimentation and poor scholarship are condemned. Outright fraud is intolerable.

Nevertheless, some fraud will exist as long as human beings are doing the experiments. Any system in which advancement, fame, and fortune await a successful practitioner will tempt a certain number of individuals to cut corners. That number may well be smaller in science than in other fields, not because scientists are more moral than others, but because the cumulative nature of science means inevitable exposure, usually in a rather short time.

An oversimplified admonition might be, "You may escape detection by falsifying an insignificant finding, but there will be no reward. You may falsify an important finding, but then it will surely form the basis for subsequent experiments and become exposed." Therefore, there is little percentage in falsifying science, and the speed with which recent examples of this unfortunate human frailty have been revealed is an indication of the pace of modern science. Some newspaper reporters have used recent fraud cases to imply that the structure of science is crumbling or that there is a cover-up, forgetting that the extent of the scientific enterprise has grown a thousandfold since the 1800s. We would expect a greater number of cases of fraud today, but there is no evidence of an increased percentage. And there is no modern equivalent of Piltown man, a fraud that took years to uncover. Still, it is important that scientists be ever vigilant, and the rash of recent frauds does suggest some dangers in modern science.

One danger arises from the nature of interdisciplinary research. Many papers have numerous authors: investigators in a laboratory that has cloning expertise collaborate with others in a laboratory that has expertise in physical instrumentation and another laboratory that does animal tests to publish a joint paper. The results of this kind of collaboration have had spectacular success, in the main, and no one would wish to limit such joint efforts. Yet when no one person has expertise in all aspects of the research, there can be dangers. A second problem arises when busy scientists, who have too many projects and too little time, supervise projects in which they have infrequent contact with those doing the experiments. Finally, the competitive world of modern science fosters some entrepreneurs who are so intent on the next grant or the big success that they forget that every good experimenter must be his own devil's advocate. A principal investigator must not only devise critical tests for his findings, but must also generate an atmosphere that encourages co-workers to report the bad news as well as the good news.

The procedures recently established by the National Institutes of Health and various universities to deal with fraud seem admirable and appropriate. The punishments for offenders are severe: usually, total derailment of a career. Because the repercussions associated with fraud are so serious, some investigations of such charges take long periods of time, but fairness to the accused is essential. Once guilt is ascertained, the loss of a career in science seems appropriate in many cases. Restitution in some form for the wasted time of those who based further experiments on the false report might be considered appropriate as well. The larger the group, the more interdisciplinary the research, the more competitive the area, the more is the need for watchful skepticism.

Having acknowledged that, we must recognize that 99.9999 percent of reports are accurate and truthful, often in rapidly advancing frontiers where data are hard to collect. There is no evidence that the small number of cases that have surfaced require a fundamental change in procedures that have produced so much good science. To continue the great advances that are being made, we must accept that perfect behavior is a desirable but unattainable goal. Vigilance? Yes. Timidity? No.—DANIEL E. KOSHLAND, JR.