LETTERS

Delayed AIDS testing

We would like to comment on the suggestion that the Department of Health and Social Security has "delayed the launch" of AIDS testing (This Week, 8 August, p 16). Premature initiation of mass anti-HTLV-III screening at British Transfusion Centres was resisted by the directors of centres as detailed in a letter to *The Lancet* (2 March, 1985, p 524). There were several reasons for "delay" and they did *not* include waiting until Wellcome Laboratories had produced their assay. In fact, few centres use Wellcome reagents for their current routine microbiological screening, so there is certainly no pre-existing bias towards that particular company.

Before any test is adopted in a transfusion centre, assessment must be a natural precondition. American donors differ from British ones in several aspects of donor demography and this is reflected in the parameters of transmission of various infections by transfusion. Thus it would have been irresponsible not to have seen for ourselves how the various tests performed in the hands of British transfusion microbiologists and when applied to British donors. Although there has *not* been any preconceived choice, the Wellcome test offers a number of potential advantages in the context of British transfusion centres and is therefore worthy of assessment. All the American tests are based on an anti-globulin assay principle using antigen of American origin; the Wellcome test uses antigen from a British patient. The Wellcome test is in a microtitre format and is compatible with other transfusion microbiological assays. In addition, it is very rapid, with no cumbersome pre-dilution stage and fewer steps than other assays.

A further major consideration was that screening of blood donations should not begin until people at risk of AIDS could easily obtain testing at sites other than transfusion centres. Our donor publicity is aimed at minimising the number of donors likely to be in AIDS-risk groups. We do not want to *attract* high-risk donors since there have been reports of virus isolation from the lymphocytes of a few anti-HTLV-III negative subjects.

Before making sweeping statements about such an important and sensitive issue, may we suggest that you please gather and present *all* the facts.

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Roll on

R. J. Gardner (Letters, 18 July, p 59) writes that pet canines delight in rolling on excrement, rotting meat and vegetation. He wonders whether this might be an instinct for concealing their smell from prey, and he wants to know if similar behaviour patterns are known in wild predators.

Tigers and lions do roll on the excrement of herbivores. Khain, the famous tigress of Simlipal (the subject of my pheromone research) rolled on elephant dung. Lions do likewise and I have discussed the matter with George Adamson (of *Born Free* fame) who shares Gardner's views. But Terence Adamson says that the taint might be to repel insects, because dung and urine of herbivores, especially goats, do so. Tony Fitzjohn (also of the Adamson's camp) says that lions frequently roll on the dung of dik dik, the smallest antelope.

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Pineal gland

Two errors have crept into my article on the pineal gland (25 July, p 36).

First, it is stated that endorphins stimulate the release of hypothalamic LHRH and thus pituitary LH. In fact, in hamsters and sheep the opiate antagonist naloxone stimulates LH production, in a season-dependent manner, suggesting that endogenous opiates, such as β-endorphin, inhibit the production of LH.

The second error occurs in the box, written by Gail Vines, which accompanied my article. We do not have any evidence that melatonin rhythms freerun in Antarctica but this is a possibility currently under investigation.

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Work blues

My attention was caught by the item "Air-conditioning and work sickness" (Science, 15 August, p 23).

Air-conditioning plant is adjusted to limit the intake of fresh air to a rate usually determined by assessing the number of people normally using the building and providing a recommended quantity of air per person. This means that in many buildings, especially those which include a large unoccupied space such as an "atrium", most of the air is being recycled within the building and is likely to contain an increasing proportion of bugs and the like which are not detected by the usual methods of measuring pollution.

Consequently, is it not likely that many sicknesses, possibly including legionnaires' disease, may be caused not by some new bug but by a build-up of bugs which have always been around but not sufficiently concentrated to overcome the body's defences?

D. M. Goodacre
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Herts

Genetic plenty

As an Ethiopian, I would like to extend my thanks to your reporter for revealing the truth about Ethiopia's contribution of genetic diversity to the high-yielding food crops throughout the world (8 August, p 22). It is indeed an irony that my country has received nothing of what it deserves in terms of research assistance to improve its food crops. It is high time that Ethiopia should get long-term research aid.

By the way, tef, once harvested is not attacked by storage-pests at all. In the field, however, it has many insect pests among which one of the most important is red tef worm (*Mentaxya ignicollis*, Walker, Lepidop Noctuidae). I have studied the biology and control of this pest in Ethiopia with the help of a scholarship from the Food and Agriculture Organisation. I am now writing up my PhD thesis on my findings.

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