"Science fiction has become darker, and I think I am one of the people who changed it." Brian Aldiss Q&A, page 698

and *Bifidobacterium* species.

Humans, particularly children, have been taking these same probiotics for many years, especially in fermented diary products. They also frequently take broad-spectrum antibiotics.

Given the current obesity pandemic among humans and the impact of antimicrobials on weight gain in animals such as poultry and pigs, there may be a case for evaluating the effects of routinely adding bacteria to our food and of long-term consumption of antibiotics.

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Some alphabets easily beat Russian letter count

SIR — In his Essay about the Phaistos Disc ('A century of puzzling' *Nature* **453,** 990–991; 2008), Andrew Robinson notes that the largest known alphabet is Russian, with 36 letters. In fact, the Russian alphabet has had 33 letters since 1918; before that, it officially had 35 (37 in reality).

But even this number falls short by comparison with the alphabets of the many consonant-rich languages of the northern Caucasus. These commonly have more than 40 letters (for example, there are 45 in Lezghin, 49 in Chechen, 51 in Avar and 62 in one of the dialects of Abkhaz).

The outright winner is the Archi alphabet, developed in 2006. This is another language from the Caucasus and has 97 letters — although many of these are groups of two, three or even four or five characters, rather than independent signs. The highest number of independent signs, at 41, is probably to be found in Abkhaz.

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Medical Research Council values basic research

SIR — The Medical Research Council (MRC) recognizes the concerns of some sections of the UK biomedical community, as highlighted by Stephen Moss in his Correspondence 'Translational research: don't neglect basic science' (*Nature* **454,** 274; 2008). The council has been clear that sustained investment in basic research — in laboratory-based as well as clinical and population settings — is an essential foundation for translational research.

The 30% increase in MRC funding over the current spending-review period includes a specific allocation for translational research. However, it also features increased funds for more basic studies. The only significant change for basic researchers is that it will be much easier for them to contribute to translational research and to work related to public health if they wish to do so.

The MRC has always recognized that giving talented investigators scope to pursue their ideas is one of the best ways to advance medical science. It will shortly be announcing the reintroduction of five-year-programme grants to improve support for longer-term research and risk-taking.

The council will continue to support a vibrant and well-resourced science base, acknowledging that investigator-led research, championed within the MRC and throughout the research community, is fundamental to what the MRC does.

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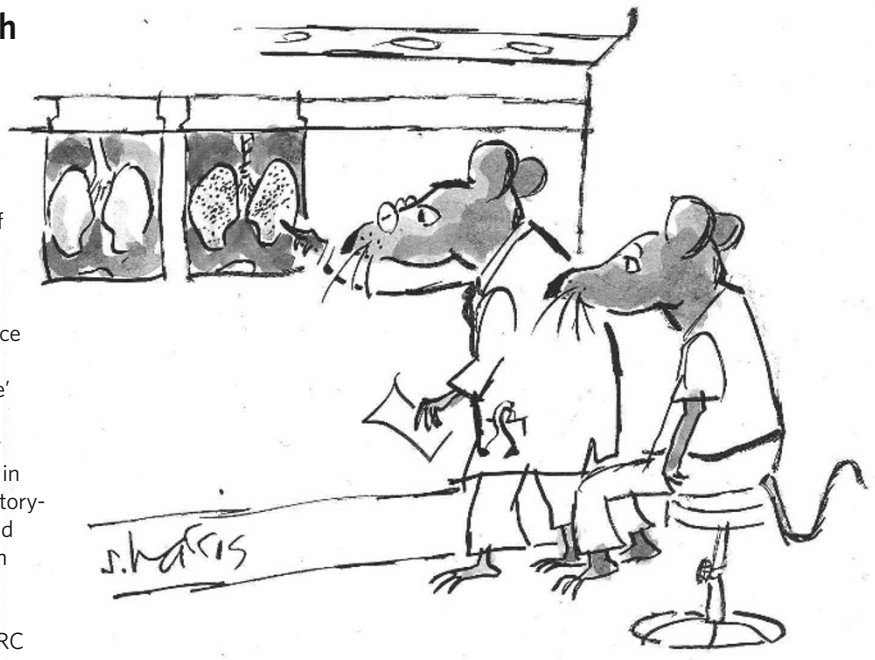

Why does work on same mouse models give different results?

SIR — Your News Q&A article 'Lab disinfectant harms mouse fertility' (*Nature* **453,** 964; 2008) must have set tongues wagging in coffee rooms throughout academia. We experienced a similar catastrophe, which took two years and exhaustive detective work to resolve, simply because we moved laboratories.

Our research relies on a widely used model of allergic lung inflammation, in which mice are exposed to a model allergen. While we were working at the University of Cambridge, the model was always reproducible. But when we returned to Ireland to continue this research, we found the lung physiology of the control mice was inexplicably abnormal for the first year.

After months of revising protocols, testing reagents and pathogen screening, we noticed that all the mice developed spontaneous, non-specific lung inflammation within four weeks of arrival, indicating that an environmental factor was probably to blame.

To cut a long story short, it turned out that mouse chow sterilized by steam autoclaving caused the release of fine particulates, and these were inhaled by mice in their individually ventilated cages. Mice fed instead with irradiated chow had normal lungs.

Unless peer-reviewed and published, such discoveries become anecdotal. So why did we not publish these findings? After a two-year hiatus doing experiments outside the area of our core research, the pressure was on to focus once more on our research aims. Additionally, the growing emphasis on commercially exploitable research, rather than on basic science, means that funding bodies are not impressed by publications on empirical investigations.

This raises a broader, unspoken question in the field of mouse immunology. Why are there differences between data generated by different groups working on apparently the same mouse model or strain?

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