A threat to medical progress

SIR—There have in recent years been several examples of a trend that has serious scientific and public importance, and in particular is liable to inhibit the development of medicine.

Any medical or surgical intervention carries, as is accepted, some degree of risk. Before devices or drugs are cleared for public use, they are subjected to close scrutiny and extended trials, and are released only if the risks are found to be acceptably small in relation to the much more substantial benefits. For example, it is accepted that the use of an intra-uterine device involves some slight increase in the risk of pelvic infection, but substantially less than the risks resulting from pregnancy, and it is equally accepted that all drugs carry some risk of undesired side-effects.

However careful and extensive the trials may be, the release of a device or drug to the public provides data on a very much larger scale; this relationship is inevitable and unavoidable. In due course, further risks may come to light, usually those which are so small that they could not have been statistically significant in the original trials.

What is then liable to happen is that the manufacturer is subjected to lawsuits by people who have nothing to lose, and in particular clients of lawyers in those countries that permit contingency fees. These cases are tried and assessed by judges and juries who are not in general scientifically trained or knowledgeable, and who are unlikely to understand statistics or statistical causality. It is then probable that one or more of these cases will succeed, and it can afterwards be said that "it has been established by a court" that the substance or device is harmful.

The manufacturer is then on the horns of a dilemma. If it does not fight the lawsuits then it loses immediately. If it does fight them it may be put to enormous costs even if it wins, and by resisting the claims it is almost certain to attract hostile publicity, in particular media attention in which it is assumed and reiterated, without evidence, that what has been supplied is unquestionably harmful. The problem is so serious that once anything is even alleged against a supplier of a drug or a medical device, there may be little option than for the supplier to go into liquidation.

If this trend continues, it may well become commercially impossible for companies to develop anything new in medicine, and this would have serious public implications.

Of course some drug companies and other large firms have not been blameless, just as others have displayed a commendably responsible attitude. The problem is that the combination of contingency-fee lawsuits and media emotionalism is almost entirely undiscriminating between those that have behaved well and those that have behaved badly. False sympathies are aroused by the media representing the problem as the little man or woman up against the commercial giant, but it needs to be remembered that it is the large company, rather than the retailer or physician, that is sued because it is only against a large corporation that large damages can be won, amounting in some recent cases to as much as £1 million.

Every sympathy and help is indeed due to someone damaged, in any circumstances, by medical intervention, but indiscriminate treasure-hunt suits do not fulfil this function and they confer a disbenefit on everybody who might need medical help in the future. The courts in this country have generally taken a responsible stand (and been castigated for it) by suppressing reports relating to a case *sub judice*; and when the report is eventually released, it may prove to be not evidence but only hearsay and unsupported assertion. Further legislative adjustment does however seem to be necessary, above all to strengthen discrimination in the assessment of alleged blame.

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Monkeyed about

SIR—Tim Beardsley's News item "Monkey business: Bolivia asks for animals back" (*Nature* **319**, 610; 1986) mentions squirrel monkeys and owl monkeys from Bolivia. The scientific names for both species are misspelled. For squirrel monkeys the correct spelling would have been *Saimiri sciureus boliviensis*, not "*Saimiri sciureus boliviensis*". Further, the appropriate nomenclature for Bolivian squirrel monkeys would have been *Saimiri boliviensis boliviensis*[1].

For owl monkeys, the correct spelling would have been *Aotus trivirgatus*, not "*Actus trivirgatusson*". Further, the correct nomenclature would have been *Aotus azarae*. According to Hershkovitz[2], virtually all the owl monkeys in Bolivia should belong to one of two subspecies of *Aotus azarae*. *Aotus* exhibits substantial between-population chromosomal variation, and it is clear that it should not be regarded as a monotypic species (as has often been the case in the biomedical research community).

There is a clear need for primates and other animals used in biomedical and behavioural research to be accurately identified. For imported primates, specific sites of origin should be included in import documents and animal records. Too often scientists do not correctly identify their animal subjects, even in reports published in the best journals. Appropriate identification of primates should be a minimum requirement for their use and importation.

I urge all scientists who use primates to make a special effort to identify the animals they use, including geographic origin, and correctly to report this information in all published materials. For bibliographic assistance, scientists should make use of the services of the Primate Information Center at University of Washington.

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1. Hershkovitz, P. *Am. J. Primatol.* **6**, 257–312 (1984).
2. Hershkovitz, P. *Am. J. Primatol.* **4**, 209–243 (1983).

Tim Beardsley replies: The names were copied faithfully from the US Fish and Wildlife Service's import documents; there is no universally recognized taxonomy of squirrel and owl monkeys. □

Soviet computers

SIR—Vera Rich reports skilfully on the planned changes in the administration of Soviet higher education (*Nature* **321**, 716; 1986). Quite apart from the fact that one shudders a little whenever the Central Committee (or even someone like Sir Keith Joseph) announces that "we have plans for you", the situation in Soviet science is actually pretty grim for those who have to put up with it (even when they have all the privileges that come with the high status of an "Academician").

For example, at a recent meeting of the Academy of Sciences in Moscow, a very eminent scientist complained in public that not only was he short of computing power, which put him two or three years behind his American opposite number, but he gained a distinct impression that there were influential people around in Soviet science who did not think computers were essential. As a result he had to resort to "unusual ways" of acquiring his computer facilities (one imagines, either by smuggling them out of Western countries, or using the telephone to communicate with a computer in the United States).

The fact is that Soviet science is run by an establishment that makes our own University Grants Committee and Science and Engineering Research Council look like a collective of enterprising young men.

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