

Letter from Chicago

Greenhouse days

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As cold winds blow over Chicago we remember with some nostalgia how this summer we lived in a greenhouse. For weeks on end the heat dried up rivers and water supplies, damaging crops and forcing farmers to kill their cattle, while in the city jogging athletes collapsed from heat exhaustion and elderly patients in nursing homes became hypernatremic from dehydration. People made (or lost) fortunes by trading soybean futures, carried out secret rain dances to propitiate the elements, or simply ran up huge electricity bills by leaving on their air conditioners. At last the weather scientists, often wrong but never in doubt, had to give up predicting the coming of a new ice age, no longer expecting to see huge glaciers wend their way past the new Bloomingdales on Michigan Avenue. Instead, a consensus of melancholy Jacques decided that "all the world's a greenhouse," warning that we should plant trees, stop burning gasoline, and give up using fluorocarbons. Looking into their crystal ball they saw melting ice and thermal expansion causing rising oceans to flood valuable coastlands and drying inland lakes giving way to malodorous swamps. Excessively mild winters would cause disease and insect infestations, warned the Cassandra scientists. There would be a massive brain drain to subtropical Canada; Yakoutsk would experience a dizzying real estate boom; and sunny Kamchatka should become a favorite meeting place for medical conventions.

Yet proffering advice on the basis of insights into the future can be a dangerous business, not only for weather experts and stockbrokers but also for doctors. Hence perhaps it is just as well that patients don't always take us seriously and often don't pay the slightest attention to what we tell them. Thus I recently happened to run into a patient whom 17 years earlier I had advised to avoid pregnancy on account of proteinuria and hypertension. She told me that she now had a teenage daughter about to enter college. She had named her Deana-a tribute to her doctor, who however deserves little credit for what in essence is an AMA baby, conceived "against medical advice."

The world's oldest person

Turning to some news items accumulated during the greenhouse year we read about Ms Florence Knapp, a retired schoolteacher, who died last year in Philadelphia at the age of 114, two weeks after becoming the world's oldest living person. She had marched for women's suffrage in 1919, retired in 1935, lived in the same house for 110 years, and remained in remarkably good health, though often wondering if God was not punishing her by letting her live so long. Also in Pennsylvania, the mayors of the state's second and third largest cities, Pittsburgh and Erie, both happened to develop amyloidosis, thus truly making this the "mayors' disease." In Chicago a surgeon was able to help a 7 year old Turkish girl suffering from the rare disease of cryptophthalmos (hidden eyes) in which the face has only nose and mouth. He found above the nose a rudimentary left eye (which will later be replaced with an artificial one) and a relatively normal one that after the completion of a corneal transplant will allow the girl to at least perceive light.

Hiccups for 30 years

Meanwhile modern technology is helping us to find our roots. Thus chemical analysis of ribosome nucleic acids has suggested that one of our remotest ancestors was a single cell organism or eocyte. Contrary to popular opinion it did not splash about in lukewarm pools but lived in near boiling water and consumed sulfur for its meals. Thermoluminescence and radiocarbon accelerator dating has produced data to support the Noah's Ark single origin theory of human evolution. According to this we descend from a single homo sapiens species (distinct from Neanderthal) that roamed around the Kalahari desert some 100 000 to 200 000 years ago. The theory is in opposition to the competing multiregional view, according to which modern man evolved from a whole host of homo erectus ancestors in a process taking place simultaneously in different parts of the world.

Yet modern technology has not been able to help the 94 year old farmer who 65 years ago strained something in his body and has been hiccupping ever since. In reply to a \$10000 reward offer for help he received 5000 letters. Proposed remedies included liquid concoctions, powders to be pushed up the nose, nerve stimulation, and a whole variety of maneuvers, but nothing worked. More successful was the Chicago fire department ambulance attendant who went out on an emergency call and was taken to his parents' house. He found his mother lying on the floor, collapsed and not breathing, and successfully brought her back to life with cardiac massage and mouth to mouth resuscitation. Yet this technique has become less popular since the AIDS epidemic, which has also caused a shortage of rubber gloves, an inability to keep up with demand, a doubling of prices, and rumors of a latex cartel being in the making in South East Asia. Also escalating is the price of llamas, quadrupling in the past six years as Americans discover that in addition to growing wool they also make gentle, quiet pets, are easy to care for, and are only occasionally provoked into spitting and kicking. But Americans will soon again be able to buy an intrauterine contraception device, all major manufacturers having stopped sales two years ago for fear of being sued. The new copper device, (T 380A) has a 1% failure rate, increases the risk of pelvic inflammatory disease by one and a half times, and is recommended for women over 25 but not for those who have "multiple sexual relationships."

Warnings

Americans also continue to debate whether anencephalic babies should be used as organ donors for transplants. They have been warned officially by the surgeon general that the nicotine in their cigarettes is as addictive as cocaine or heroin. They have learnt that the antihypertensive clonidine may help them give up smoking. And they have read that beef and chocolate may not be so bad after all, experiments changing diets from palmitic to stearic acid actually lowering total cholesterol. The beef industry was jubilant but apparently has not been let off the hook, the prevailing prudent advice to Americans still being to eat less fat. They have also been told to be careful about AIDS, sunbathing, smoking cigarettes, eating sweets, drinking liquor, burning gasoline, using fluorocarbons, running for public office (precipitates amyloid fibrils), and throwing stones in greenhouses.