

Letter from . . . Chicago

Year of love

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The world would be a happier place, suggests Kurt Vonnegut, if we had a little less love and a little more common decency. Brought up on the loveless films of Laurel and Hardy, and unable to see a difference between his love for people and his love for dogs, Mr Vonnegut tells how he has at times awkwardly hugged various members of his family, and, while not necessarily finding the experience unpleasant, it merely reminded him of rolling around on a rug with his Great Dane. But not everybody finds love as unimportant as Mr Vonnegut, and from romantic Uganda we hear that the Lion of Africa, wearing his heart on his famous red sleeve, decreed that 1978 was to be the year of love and reconciliation. The nature of love, however, remains poorly understood, especially in America, where the last federally funded study of why people fall in love was distinguished by Senator Proxmire with one of his Golden Fleece awards for the biggest and most ridiculous example of wasting taxpayers' money. Also qualifying for the award have been studies of the social behaviour of the Alaskan brown bear (\$18 000), an exploration of the ramifications of hitchhiking, a census of dogs and cats in various parts of California, an investigation of Peruvian brothels, and an inquiry into why people are rude on tennis courts. Other federally supported studies highlighted by the Lion of the Golden Fleece have included an examination of the African climate during the last Ice Age (\$112 000), a study of primate teeth (\$81 000), an investigation of whether sunfish become more aggressive drinking gin or tequila (\$120 000), and a \$1m study to find out what makes monkeys, rats, and men clench their teeth—all regarded by the senator as schemes designed to fleece the taxpayers of their money.

And yet the \$84 000 study of the difference between "passionate" and "companionate" love is already yielding important results, and we learn that the average duration of romantic frenzy is six to 30 months; that intense passion usually subsides after a couple of years but is perpetuated by limited access and parental opposition; and that there is no significant difference between the success rate of women who play hard to get and those who are easily available. Other studies indicate that there is a considerable difference when there is also beauty; that for the ugly life is not pretty; that teachers, employers, jurors, and voters favour good-looking individuals; that appearances have often played an important part in presidential elections; and that only rarely have Americans elected a bald man as their president. Nor should they elect a man with unruly hair, it seems, for this may indicate abnormal brain development, Down's or de Lange syndrome, with the small calvarium failing to stretch the scalp, so that the follicles grow straight down causing the intractable

hair shafts to stand up on end like quills. But for voters and lovers the appearance of the teeth may also have a decisive role, as well as accounting for the recent interest in Count Dracula as a sex symbol rather than an object of horror and fear.

From the realms of sociology we note that people maintaining strong personal relationships are two to two-and-a-half less likely to die in a nine-year period than people living alone; and that lack of human companionship, sudden loss of love, and chronic loneliness may cause serious disease and premature death. Strong relationships, however, seem to strengthen resistance to disease, and these beneficial social contracts do not of necessity include marriage. Sexual activity also benefits health, notwithstanding the unfortunate outcome in the cases of Attila the Hun and Errol Flynn, since it burns off 150 calories per episode; relieves menstrual cramps; releases cortisone for six to eight hours (beneficial in arthritis); and alleviates depression, irritability, and insomnia. But promiscuity causes venereal disease and cervical cancer from herpes infection. It may also damage the heart, causing severe rises of heart rate and blood pressure; and in a Japanese study 80% of people dying during intercourse met their demise while with an extramarital lover. These studies, though not statistically significant, suggest that a bad marriage is better than no marriage at all, and that it is still better to marry than to burn.

It is also still regarded as desirable, in our overpopulated world, to have a couple of children running around the house. Yet this is not always possible, and for many married couples denied access to cloning or romance in a test-tube, adoption remains the only recourse to avoiding a lonely old age and having one's estate pass to those hateful Canadian cousins. But babies for adoption are hard to come by, because of the easing of abortion laws and of the new morality that accepts unwedded motherhood, giving rise to a flourishing black market in human lives, with international underground organisations methodically recruiting pregnant mothers for later shipment of their babies across State or national boundaries. Some adoption brokers charge as much as \$50 000 for a healthy crying baby; yet even the more usual fee of \$12 000 still provides adequate profits for the services of the surrogate mothers, the commissions of the brokers and lawyers, and the various other incidental expenses. It is believed that some 5000 newborn children are adopted each year through the black market; and in the absence of effective federal laws the selling and buying of babies continue to flourish in this year of love.

Recombinant DNA research

The love-life of *Escherichia coli* and related strains, however, has lately become much less troubled, and many of the fears about a monstrous Frankenstein bacterium escaping from his Petri dish and wiping out the human race seem to have been unfounded. Yet only two years ago concerned citizens for a better environment were marching to protest against the horrors of recombinant DNA research, lawyers from several organisa-

tions were planning legal action, and Congress was considering several Bills outlawing genetic engineering. But this was also the time of the first outbreak of legionnaire's disease and of the revelations that for 20 years the army had conducted simulated bacterial warfare attacks and sprayed *Serratia marcescens* and other organisms against civilian targets.

Since that time, however, it has become apparent that the dangers of recombinant DNA research may have been exaggerated and that genetic manipulation may be of great value in research and useful in the manufacture of various products such as insulin and other hormones, antiviral substances, and antibodies. In late 1977 the American Society of Microbiology, while endorsing the need for national standards, expressed opposition to legislative proposals creating an expensive and elaborate bureaucracy that would impose unduly restrictive controls over this type of research; and in New York the governor vetoed a bill that would have placed tight restrictions on DNA research by "intruding in an area where freedom of inquiry and exploration should be maximised and regulations, if any, should be narrowly and strictly defined." In early 1978 a House subcommittee on science, research, and technology reported that DNA research seemed no more dangerous than research on natural diseases, which in some cases can be even more dangerous. Subsequently, the National Institutes of Health also proposed easing the current regulations on this type of research, and Congress has remained laudably inactive in passing any legislation. There is, moreover, a growing sentiment that the burden of proof is shifting towards those who would impose restrictions, and, while the ultimate implications of recombinant DNA research remain unknown, there is much to be said for the point of view that, though the public has a right to be informed, it also has a right to be protected against false alarms.

Bogus doctors

Another controversy this year stemmed from the reported presence in operating rooms of salesmen of surgical instruments and devices. It seems that some of the complicated staplers, pins, screws, artificial joints, and electrical instruments require no end of technical know-how, and that in many cases the surgeons and nurses have the salesmen in the operating room to help advise on potential electrical or mechanical problems. It has been alleged, however, that some of the salesmen have actually participated in operations such as craniotomies, hip and knee replacements, laparotomies, subtotal gastrectomies, and bowel resections, helping with craniotomy saws, controlling recalcitrant staplers, correcting the position of a knee device that had been inserted backwards, inserting pacemakers, or merely holding retractors. Worse still, some of the salesmen later boasted about their exploits on the golf course, giving rise to no end of publicity, exposés, and investigations.

Meanwhile in Illinois this year at least two ingenious visitors from Asia had an interesting time posing as doctors. One of them, a native of India, has had a not unprofitable career in Chicago, helping in neurosurgical operations, issuing wholesale prescriptions for narcotics, treating scores of children at a paediatric clinic, and even conducting teaching rounds at the county jail hospital. For his labours he collected \$51 000 from our efficient welfare system, after which he disappeared, only to resurface later in Alaska, where he was arrested just after obtaining a temporary licence to practise. His less adventurous colleague from Peoria, an 18-year-old Philippino bus-boy, limited his practice to only two hospitals, where he walked around in a white coat and with a stethoscope, examined patients, studied charts, and unsuccessfully attempted a venepuncture on a patient with renal disease. At the time of his arrest it was discovered that he had been previously fired from a restaurant because he was unreliable and was always playing with knives. But at the hospital, where people thought he was a medical student, it was later announced that "no serious medical blunders had occurred as a result of the alleged deception."

Pigs and male chauvinism

Finally, we read in this year of love that dating by computer has given way to mating by computer, for cows, so that the right cow is matched with the right bull for maximal productivity. The *Wall Street Journal* reports that this has been a good year for insects, with fire ants, grasshoppers, gypsy moths, the Japanese beetle, and the common tick having a wonderful time because the regulatory bodies caved in to the cries of the environmentalists and banned or severely restricted the use of most effective insecticides. But the whales, by contrast, remain in serious trouble, being vigorously exterminated by the fleets of many nations, prompting a young man in Chicago to protest by climbing to the top of the 110-storey Sears Tower and causing quite a commotion. Also in trouble are the pigs, who instead of going to the market increasingly end up in laboratories, taking the place of dogs and monkeys as subjects for research on arteriosclerosis and bone development. Being quite similar to humans, they are quite useful for studying alcoholism and alcohol withdrawal, but, though intelligent and clean when sober, they make unsuitable pets, being inclined to grow to embarrassing sizes. And the Chinese—who formerly with barbarous ejaculations would burn down their houses to enjoy the enchanting aroma and delicious crackling of the scorched flesh—have not only abandoned this practice but also taken to reforming their alphabet. In the process they have booted the pig out of the house, so that in the new script a house will be represented by a square having in its middle not a pig but a man.

For human pigs, however, a new magazine appropriately entitled *Male Chauvinist* tells how to become involved sexually but not emotionally, how to cheat on your wife or girlfriend, and how to stay ahead in the war of the sexes. Methods recommended to keep a woman in her place include keeping her pregnant and on a strict allowance; never telling her the truth; encouraging her to attend women's lib meetings (which will allow you to spend another evening with the boys); or telling her "I love you" in 100 different ways to establish a Pavlovian reflex and induce her to salivate with glee at the very sound of her beloved husband's voice.

A 50-year-old patient with postural oedema has been on amiloride hydrochlorothiazide (Moduretic). She has recently developed a metallic taste in her mouth. Is this a known side effect of this drug?

Disturbance of taste does not seem to be a reported side effect of Moduretic. Nevertheless, it has been described in association with amiloride in one report of a study in which 24 patients already receiving frusemide for severe cardiac failure were given amiloride, 20 mg/day.¹ Alteration in taste with nausea was the only appreciable side effect reported, and the drug was stopped in three patients because of this. The precise nature of the taste abnormality is not stated. I can find no convincing reports of taste disturbance produced by hydrochlorothiazide or any other thiazide diuretic.

¹ Davidson, C, and Gillebrand, I M, *British Heart Journal*, 1973, **35**, 456.

What is the treatment of chronic otitis media?

The two varieties of chronic suppurative otitis media are "safe" (or tympanic) and cholesteatoma, the latter being potentially dangerous. The tympanic disorder is seen in association with central tympanic membrane defects; and cholesteatoma, which usually produces a foul-smelling discharge, with attic or posterior marginal perforations. Differentiation between the two varieties is mandatory and may necessitate dry mopping or clearance by suction. The first aim with central tympanic membrane defects is eradication of infection by preventing water from entering the ear canal and using broad-spectrum antibiotics when necessary (such as amoxycillin or cotrimoxazole) if facilities are not available for bacterial sensitivity tests. When the ear has been free of infection for several months tympanoplasty may be performed. Cholesteatoma, however, usually requires some form of mastoid exploration with excision of disease to result in an ear that is safe and, in most instances, dry.