

Letters

A Neutral Stance Is Impossible

The objective person is one who knows his biases. To maintain a neutral stance is impossible; one can only attempt to compensate for known biases. I cannot see any more reason for the faculty member to "lose his objectivity" by testifying in court or in regulatory proceedings, as Schanz states (Letters, 27 June) than he would by being a member of a state or federal commission or study group.

Too frequently in recent years, persons with knowledge of the subject have been excluded from study groups or commissions because of their supposed lack of objectivity as a result of their employment by industry. Would it not be wiser to recognize bias and aim for the formation of study groups composed of representatives known to have certain biases and points of view? Too often the unbiased witness is also the uninformed witness.

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XYX Chromosome: Legal Hazards

Kennedy McWhirter's valuable discussion (Letters, 6 June) of what should be done when an XYX man has been convicted of a criminal offense leaves one important practical problem unsolved.

Unfortunately we have to admit that there is at present no treatment, nor any immediate prospect of this being developed, which can be expected to have any specific effect upon the XYX syndrome, apart from the usual reformative training attempted with cytologically normal delinquents. Whatever treatment is tried, nobody can say that an XYX man who has once committed an offense is no longer at risk of doing so again, anymore than would any normal prisoner who appeared to have responded to corrective training.

So granting that "Ideally the duty of

the state, as soon as XYX is diagnosed (after the onset of overt criminal symptoms) is to protect the public . . . and to seek to restore normal function in, and then liberty to, the XYX subject," a man so diagnosed might expect to find himself kept in nonpunitive custody for a very long time. That being so, anyone sentenced to less than about 10 years imprisonment (and in Britain, at any rate, "life" imprisonment, even for murder, is now very seldom longer than that), would probably be well-advised *not* to plead cytological abnormality in mitigation of sentence.

McWhirter discusses the legal liability of "Psychiatrists who fail to obtain a cytologist's report on a patient who might reasonably be in the XYX category." A more likely situation is that in which a prisoner refuses, on legal advice, to allow any such examination at all. It could, of course, be made compulsory by court order. But to use force to compel a prisoner, not in any meaningful sense insane, to submit to an examination the purpose of which he may reasonably believe is to obtain evidence which will be used to his own disadvantage, however beneficial it may be for society as a whole, does raise some very real legal and constitutional problems.

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Oil Spills—An Old Story

Considering the amount of research that is being carried out on the Outer Continental Shelf, Carter is justified in his surprise that the information gap on offshore oil should be so wide (2 May, p. 530). Besides all the modern methods of undersea exploration and the sophisticated sensing equipment being used to gather data, it is amazing how much a little historical investigation can unearth. After charting the coastline of what is now Alaska, British Columbia, and Washington, the great English sea-

man, Captain George Vancouver, visited California in the *Discovery* in 1793, and made this entry in his log for Sunday, 10 November (1):

The surface of the sea, which was perfectly smooth and tranquil, was covered with a thick slimy substance, which, when separated, or disturbed by any little agitation, became very luminous, whilst the light breeze that came principally from the shore, brought with it a very strong smell of burning tar, or of some such resinous substance. The next morning the sea had the appearance of dissolved tar floating upon its surface, which covered the ocean in all directions within the limits of our view; and indicated that in this neighbourhood it was not subject to much agitation.

By coincidence, this was in the very area of Santa Barbara where the undersea oil well blew up recently, and following which the Department of the Interior stated that "there is a lack of sufficient knowledge of this particular geological area!"

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Reference

1. J. S. Marshall, *Vancouver's Voyage* (Mitchell Press, Vancouver, 1967), p. 112.

Undergraduates in Research

I agree with Stirling A. Colgate's letter (20 June) concerning undergraduate involvement in research. I teach an undergraduate course in experimental psychology, with an emphasis on neuropsychological mechanisms, in which one of the major purposes is to acquaint students with current techniques and research findings in this area. I have found it possible to bring research findings into the undergraduate classroom and to interest students in some of the research I am personally doing. This can be done effectively if undergraduates are invited into the laboratory at the beginning of the semester in order to acquaint them with standard pieces of equipment such as microtomes and stereotaxic instruments, and if much of the remainder of the semester is spent presenting representative findings obtainable with these techniques. Some of these undergraduates actually go on to major in psychology.

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