Quite aside from the merits of the environmental arguments, I must protest the tactics of the Sierra Club, which can be viewed as little better than thinly disguised blackmail by the gas users of the Washington, D.C., area who ultimately will have to pay the additional costs of the modified plan. Let no one be deceived; it is the consumer who will pay the added bill, not Columbia LNG.

This decision was arrived at by attorneys for Columbia LNG and the Sierra Club without the benefit of consultation with responsible public officials of the area concerned, and certainly without the public hearings that usually precede such decisions.

In this brave new world of environmentalism, who speaks for the taxpayer and consumer? Certainly neither the Sierra Club or Columbia LNG can claim to in this matter. It is time that the public and their responsible officials had a voice in environmental matters of long-range concern to the area affected. Personally I don't want the Sierra Club deciding my gas bills for the next few decades, and I strongly protest the undemocratic, elitist flavor of this whole affair.

GEORGE H. DAVIS

10408 Insley Street,
Silver Spring, Maryland 20902

Radiation Standards

Robert Gillette's review (News and Comment, 1 Dec. 1972, p. 966) of the National Academy of Sciences's report on "The effects on populations of exposure to low levels of ionizing radiation" was by and large accurate and helpful in emphasizing the implications for radiation protection. However, an impression of establishment influence was unfortunately created by the manner of reference to the fact that about a third of the parent academy committee of 20 are members of the National Council on Radiation Protection and Measurements (NCRP). Normally this would be trivial, but, because of previous controversy and especially because the value of the report will depend in large measure upon public confidence and acceptance, I should like to clarify this matter and reemphasize points of departure.

The academy report as a whole represents the thought and effort of some 50 members of the committee and its subcommittees, who were carefully selected to bring individual competence, judgment, and balance to the undertaking. They were exhorted to represent their personal views rather than those of any institution or organization with which they may have been affiliated. Naturally, careful study was made of the publications of various organizations, especially those of NCRP, because of its responsible role in radiation protection over the years. The interested scientist can read the report itself and make judgments as to varying points of view. However, for the benefit of those not familiar with radiation protection literature, I should like to generalize about the differences between the academy report and previous official documentation. These differences arise not so much from new data or new interpretations but rather from a philosophic approach to radiation protection generated by changing conditions and public attitudes.

The major differences I conceive to be as follows: (i) Numerical risk estimates for human populations exposed to low levels of ionizing radiation are presented together with the assumptions and compilations of the data on which they are based. (ii) Consideration is given to implications of possible effects of radiation on the environment—on organisms other than man. (iii) It is suggested that radiation protection standards not be set on an arbitrary basis, such as related to background levels (even though all agree that such levels will not produce observable effects), but rather should be established in terms of minimal exposures required to fill society's needs. Hopefully, it will be possible to make meaningful risk-benefit assessments, then to make cost-effectiveness assessments so that logical decisions can be made as to the worth of any given effort to reduce the risk, and finally to choose among the options by comparing the biological and environmental costs.

Ultimately, these techniques for dealing with radiation protection (actually estimating the risks and the worth of reducing them) may provide guidance in the case of other pollutants, since the time is coming when priority decisions will have to be made in the allocation of limited resources for the maintenance and improvement of the quality of life.

C. L. COMAR

Department of Physical Biology,
New York State Veterinary College,
Cornell University, Ithaca 14850