LETTERS

PBB Incident

Luther J. Carter's article "Michigan's PBB incident: Chemical mix-up leads to disaster" (News and Comment, 16 Apr., p. 240) drives home the message that we can no longer be so casual with the stream of exotic chemicals flowing into commerce. In the future we must look to better living through responsible chemistry and effective control.

Carter refers to my role and that of George Fries in identifying PBB (polybrominated biphenyl) as the Michigan contaminant. I wish to acknowledge the unselfish and productive efforts of our veterinarian, the late Ted F. Jackson, who worked hand in hand with us on the problem right down to the wire, and of Al Furr, formerly with the National Animal Disease Center, Ames, Iowa, who brought new meaning to the phrase "Rocky Mountain High" by discovering the late emerging peaks characteristic of PBB in gas chromatograph analysis of our feed.

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Energy Conservation and Credibility

Philip H. Abelson's editorial "Energy diplomacy" (30 Apr., p. 429) implies some fault in the public for not being "conservation-minded." We have just completed a survey of public perceptions and attitudes concerning energy-related problems. The survey was conducted by professional interviewers using an open-ended format and involved a statistically valid sample of a metropolitan population of 350,000 persons.

Our findings indicate that the public is behaving with extraordinary internal consistency. If they believe that the United States and the world will run out of effective supplies of oil and natural gas in the next 50 years, or that there is an energy-related problem which goes beyond waste in our society or manipulated (by government or big business) shortages, they respond with a variety of conservation adjustments including plans to buy a smaller car, drive less, turn down heat, use less electricity, and so forth. Indeed, they have been acting on these beliefs for the last 2 years.

The problem is that they do not believe there is or will be a supply problem. When asked whom they trusted for energy information, 21 percent said no one, and 20 percent said they did not know whom to trust. Only 9 percent believe the information put forth by the federal government. If we consider the contradictory statements to which they have been exposed, the public is responding in a realistic manner.

Given the internal consistency of behavior, changing the public's perception of the reality of the problem should have immediate effects on conservation behavior. The fault lies with decision-makers and leadership, not with public unwillingness to make necessary changes. Current references to the public's unwillingness to conserve energy appear to be not unlike the "blaming the victim" syndrome in the literature on poverty.

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Swine Flu: Quantifying the "Possibility"

We need better rules for translating everyday language into quantities and vice versa, especially in the area of probability. Philip M. Boffey (News and Comment, 14 May, p. 636) reports that President Ford, in referring to the campaign against swine flu, spoke of an epidemic as a "very real possibility." Boffey consulted at least four experts and reports their responses concerning the probability of a swine flu epidemic in the 1976–77 season as being, respectively, 2 percent, 10 percent, 35 percent, and "less than even," which I translate as "less than 50 percent." The 2 percent responder regarded his number as plucked out of the air; we were not told how the others regarded theirs.

Boffey then says, "Those probability estimates, though far lower than the official rhetoric of the campaign would lead one to expect, do not necessarily mean that the vaccination campaign is a foolish endeavor." I wish to address the question of whether the estimates are far lower than the official rhetoric should have led us to expect. Since Boffey emphasizes Ford's concern about the " 'very real possibility' of a dangerous epidemic in the United States next fall and winter," I regard the phrase "very real possibility" as the official rhetoric needing quantification. Boffey has done the fieldwork of consulting experts for their guesses. Judith Selvidge (*1*) found, from responses of Harvard Business