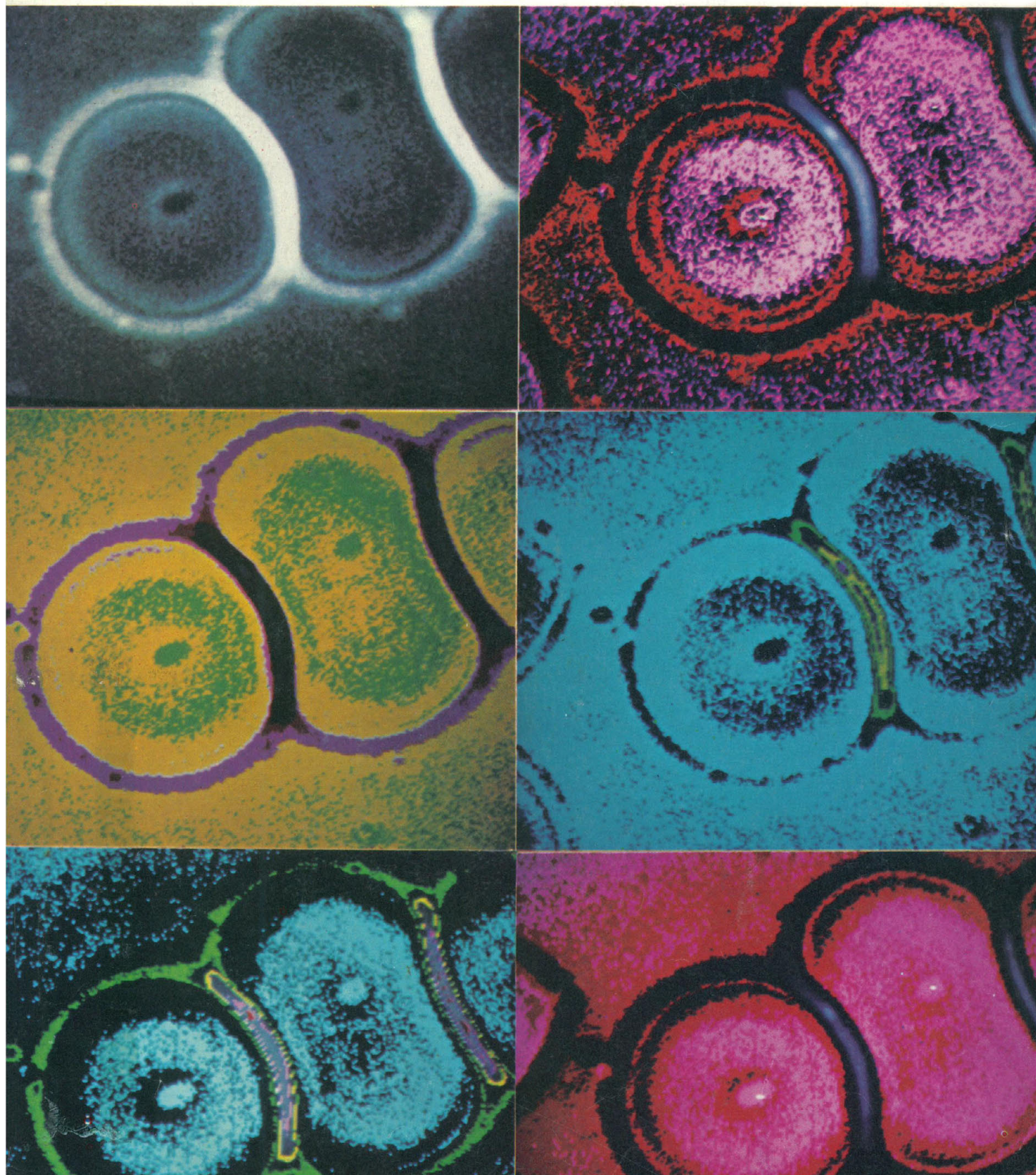


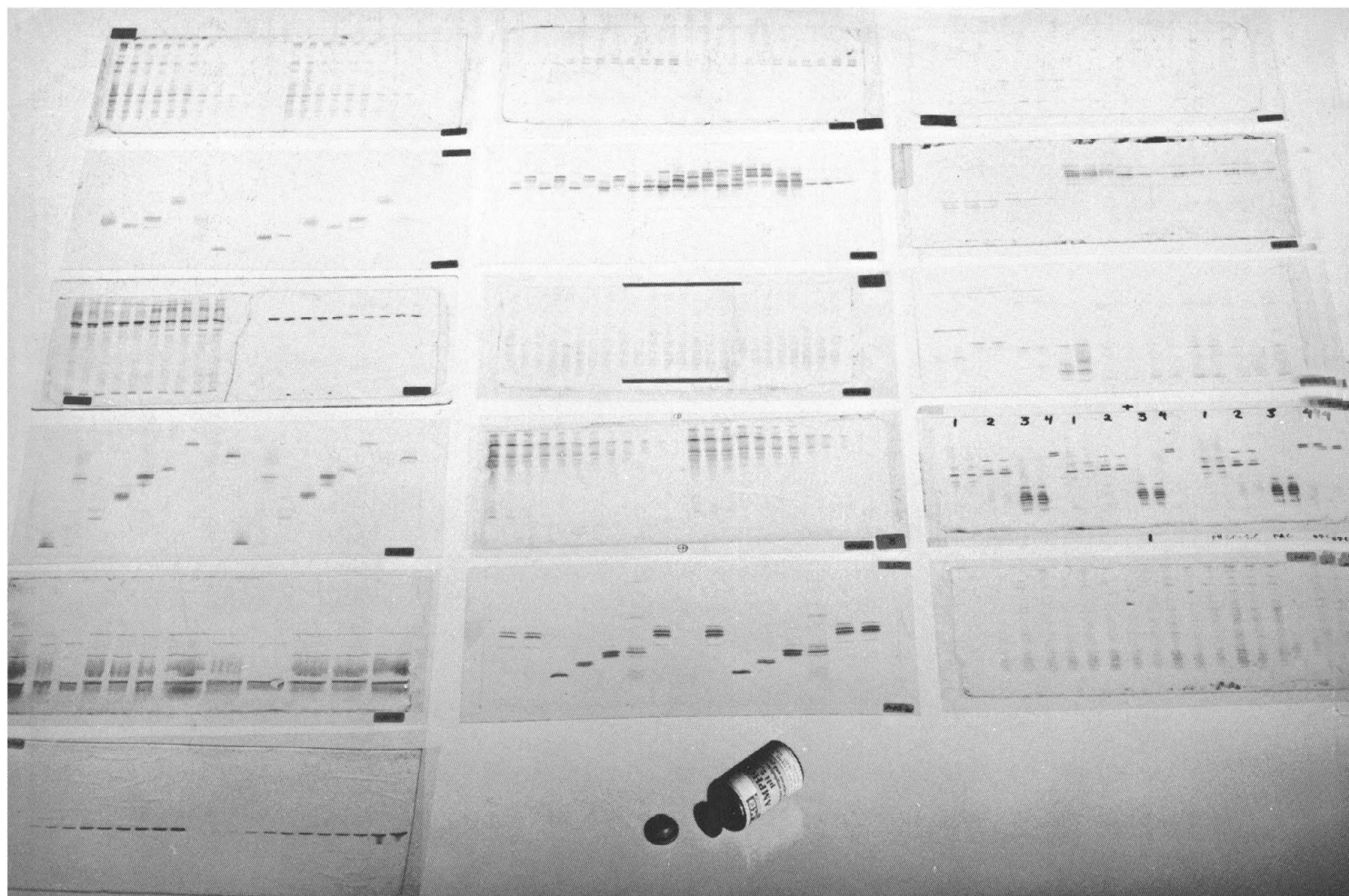
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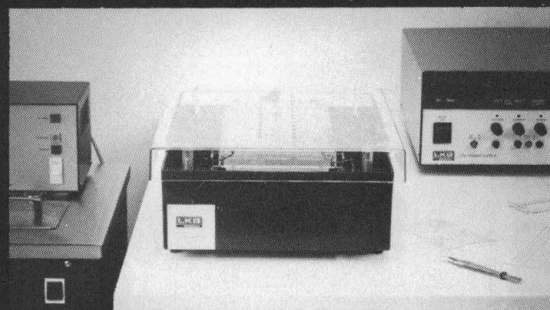
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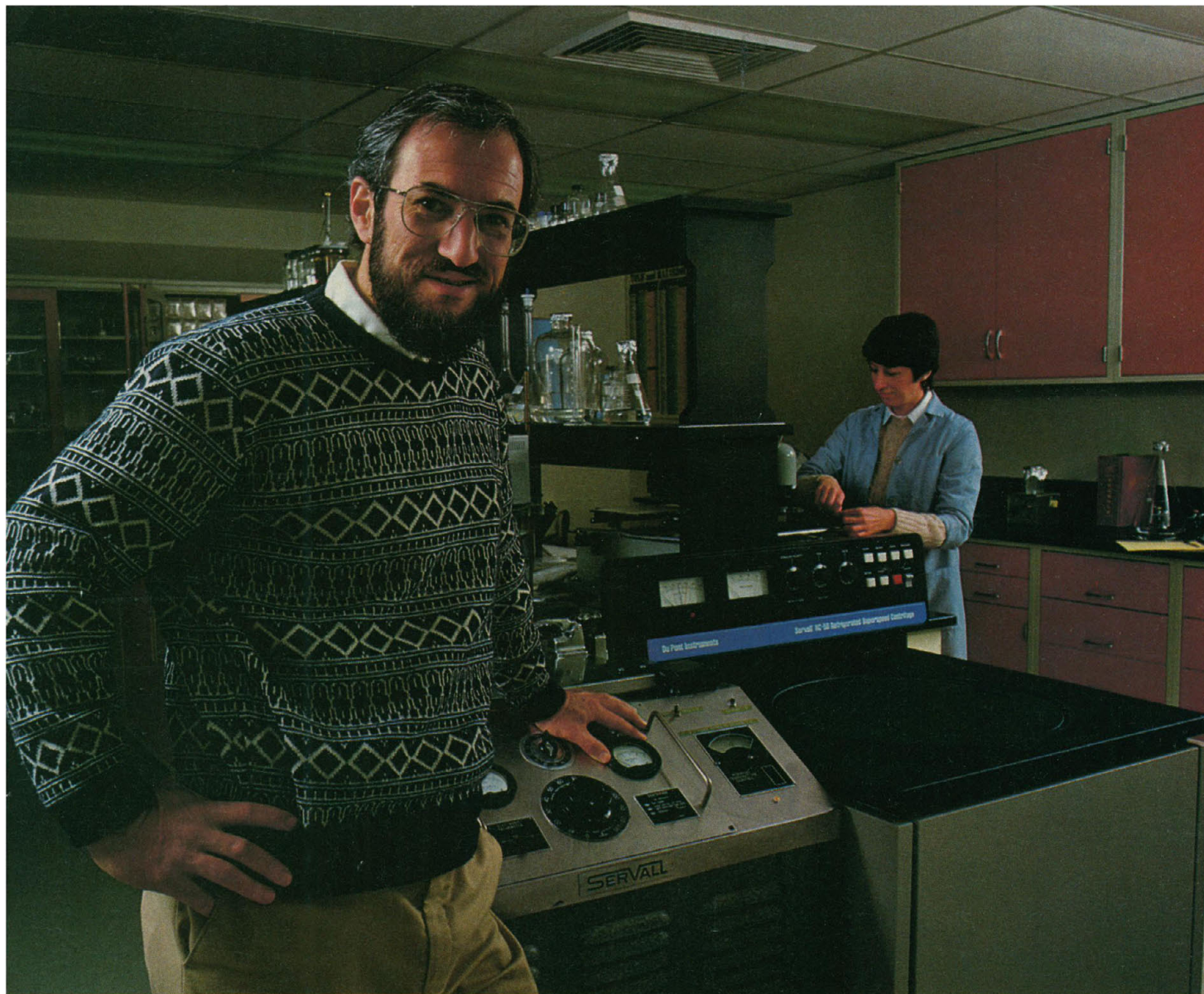


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LETTERS	Research Practices: <i>H. Hillman</i> ; Human Life: <i>C. B. Goodhart, R. P. Rooney, B. Heffernan</i> ; Information Management: <i>Y. M. Braunstein</i> ; Wine Ranking: <i>B. P. Solomon and F. A. Troy</i>	494
EDITORIAL	Scientists' Responsibility for Public Information: <i>C. B. Raleigh</i>	499
ARTICLES	Selection by Consequences: <i>B. F. Skinner</i>	501
	Laser Microsurgery in Cell and Developmental Biology: <i>M. W. Berns et al.</i>	505
	Biomass as a Source of Chemical Feedstocks: An Economic Evaluation: <i>B. O. Palsson et al.</i>	513
NEWS AND COMMENT	Nutrition Research: End of an Empire.....	518
	Keyworth to Review Space Program.....	519
	Reagan Energy Plan Reluctantly Unveiled.....	520
	Brain of Einstein Continues Peregrinations.....	521
	Reagan Outlines Nonproliferation Policy.....	522
	<i>Briefing</i> : Drug Shows Promise Against Herpes; For Sale: A Billion Acres of Outer Continental Shelf; UC Regents Extend Weapons Lab Agreement; Chilean Physicians Released; Science Board Cautiously Supports Social Research; Iraq to Rebuild Reactor.....	524
RESEARCH NEWS	Malathion Threat Debunked.....	526
	Earthquake Prediction Retracted.....	527
	CERN Council Defers LEP Approval.....	528
BOOK REVIEWS	Harvey and the Oxford Physiologists, <i>reviewed by T. S. Hall</i> ; Environmental Physiology of Fishes, <i>J. N. Cameron</i> ; Parmana, <i>O. F. Linares</i> ; The Hurricane and Its Impact, <i>R. A. Anthes</i> ; Dynamics of the Upper Atmosphere, <i>J. M. Forbes</i> ; Books Received.....	532
REPORTS	Initial Effects of Ashfall from Mount St. Helens on Vegetation in Eastern Washington and Adjacent Idaho: <i>R. N. Mack</i>	537
	Mount St. Helens Eruption of 18 May 1980: Air Waves and Explosive Yield: <i>W. L. Donn and N. K. Balachandran</i>	539

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Rapid Massive Assemble of Tight Junction Strands: <i>B. Kachar and P. Pinto da Silva</i>	541
Diketopiperazine Formation During Investigations of Amino Acid Racemization in Dipeptides: <i>S. Steinberg and J. L. Bada</i>	544
Benzodiazepine Inhibition of the Calcium-Calmodulin Protein Kinase System in Brain Membrane: <i>R. J. DeLorenzo, S. Burdette, J. Holderness</i>	546
Nullisomic Tetrahymena: Eliminating Germinal Chromosomes: <i>P. J. Bruns and T. E. B. Brussard</i>	549
Diameter of the Cell-to-Cell Junctional Membrane Channels as Probed with Neutral Molecules: <i>G. Schwarzmann et al.</i>	551
Plasmid DNA in <i>Treponema pallidum</i> (Nichols): Potential for Antibiotic Resistance by Syphilis Bacteria: <i>M. V. Norgard and J. N. Miller</i>	553
Falciparum Malaria-Infected Erythrocytes Specifically Bind to Cultured Human Endothelial Cells: <i>I. J. Udeinya et al.</i>	555
Female Feathering in Sebright Cocks Is Due to Conversion of Testosterone to Estradiol in Skin: <i>F. W. George, J. F. Noble, J. D. Wilson</i>	557
Copper Deficiency Suppresses the Immune Response in Mice: <i>J. R. Prohaska and O. A. Lukasewycz</i>	559
Role of Golgi Apparatus in Sorogenesis by the Cellular Slime Mold <i>Fonticula alba</i> : <i>M. C. Deasey and L. S. Olive</i>	561
Mesenchymal Cells from the Human Embryonic Palate Are Highly Responsive to Epidermal Growth Factor: <i>T. Yoneda and R. M. Pratt</i>	563
Tumor-Induced Anorexia in the Wistar Rat: <i>J. P. Mordes and A. A. Rossini</i>	565
Pentapeptide (Proctolin) Associated with an Identified Neuron: <i>M. O'Shea and M. E. Adams</i>	567
Thyroidectomy Increases Rat Hepatic Ferritin Iron: <i>J. C. Winkelmann et al.</i>	569
Pineal <i>N</i> -Acetyltransferase Is Inactivated by Disulfide-Containing Peptides: Insulin Is the Most Potent: <i>M. A. A. Namboodiri, J. T. Favilla, D. C. Klein</i>	571
Early Removal of One Eye Reduces Normally Occurring Cell Death in the Remaining Eye: <i>D. R. Seneglaub and B. L. Finlay</i>	573
Ethanol Tolerance in the Rat Is Learned: <i>J. R. Wenger et al.</i>	575
Environmental Sex Determination: Interaction of Temperature and Genotype in a Fish: <i>D. O. Conover and B. E. Kynard</i>	577
The AF64A-Treated Mouse: Possible Model for Central Cholinergic Hypofunction: <i>C. R. Mantione, A. Fisher, I. Hanin</i>	579
Δ^9 -Tetrahydrocannabinol Increases Plasma Testosterone Concentrations in Mice: <i>S. Dalterio, A. Bartke, D. Mayfield</i>	581
Tolerance and Cross-Tolerance in Chronic Alcoholics: Reduced Membrane Binding of Ethanol and Other Drugs: <i>H. Rottenberg, A. Waring, E. Rubin</i> ...	583
Technical Comment: Radiation Doses from Mount St. Helens 18 May 1980 Eruption: <i>J. K. Soldat et al.</i>	585

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Computer-pseudocolor-enhanced video images of red blood cells following placement of a 2-micrometer laser lesion (dark spots in black-and-white photo). Different color enhancements bring out specific detail not detectable by conventional microscopy. Note small white spot (0.4 micrometer) in red enhancements; this is a hot spot in center of laser lesion not detectable in black-and-white photo. See page 505. [Michael W. Berns, Department of Developmental and Cell Biology, University of California, Irvine 92717]

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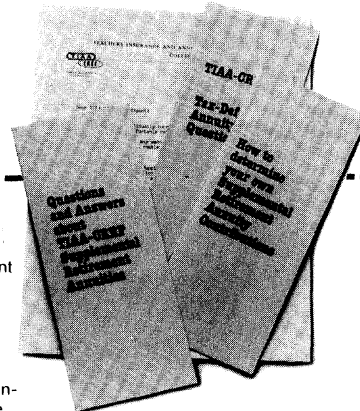
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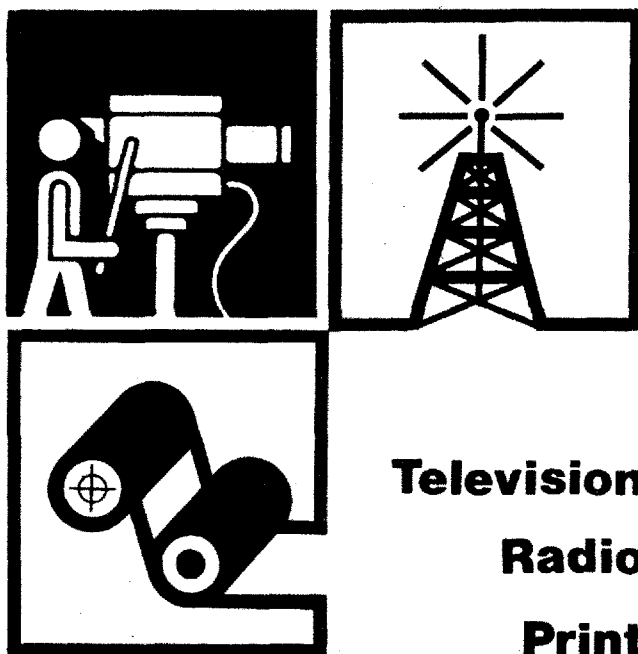
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Scientists' Responsibility for Public Information

One of the more vexing questions confronting scientists whose research may have a direct impact on the lives of the public has to do with the pressures to release observations and conclusions prematurely. One example is the question of early dissemination of information bearing on the likelihood of a major earthquake.

Geophysicists generally agree that results of earthquake prediction studies to date, although promising, do not indicate early arrival at the goal of providing accurate predictions of the time, place, and magnitude of large earthquakes. It is possible, from retrospective looks at phenomena immediately preceding some large earthquakes and from a few accurately predicted events such as the 1975 Haicheng earthquake in northeast China, to see certain premonitory patterns. However, when confronted by one or more apparent anomalies in geophysical observations in earthquake-prone areas, what is the responsible course of action for the scientists involved?

There have been too few repetitions of the precursor-earthquake relationship to allow any realistic estimates of the probability of an earthquake's occurrence. Therefore, attempts to inform the public of the scientists' concern over potentially precursory changes must be so hedged with qualifications that public officials would have no basis for taking any but routine precautionary measures, such as leaving fire trucks outside fire stations. Estimates of the time and magnitude of the possible event would probably be too uncertain to call for such measures as evacuation of unsafe structures and shutdown of nuclear reactors. However, between these extremes there is still a range of precautions that could be taken, although at some expense and with some loss of normal public services. If a severe earthquake following a vague warning does occur with injury and loss of life, does the failure of public officials to act render them liable for civil suits? If, on the other hand, the earthquake does not take place, are the costs of having taken routine precautions likely to reflect on the competence of the officials? Indirect costs to individuals, such as loss in property value, might also make for civil liability.

In our litigious society, little allowance is made for normal human errors if they have a substantial effect on someone's pocketbook or health. A course of action might be to maintain that earthquake prediction is still a subject for research and that no results, at present, warrant short-term or public warnings. A critical, objective look at the assembly of precursory phenomena collected up to now might lead most scientists to take this stance, in view of the potential for litigation and loss of public confidence to ensue from erroneous public predictions.

A different position has been taken in the past. In 1979 the U.S. Geological Survey issued a press release noting anomalous variations in radon emission and strain accumulation in southern California. It was hoped that the release would spur prudent homeowners to prepare for a possible large earthquake. A factual account of the observations and their significance, or lack thereof, is the only way to dispel the rumors that flourish in the absence of official statements. Thus, discussion of the observations has appeared to be the soundest policy, despite uncertainty about the public's reaction to the expressions of concern accompanying the discussion.

As our understanding of precursory phenomena improves, there will undoubtedly be warnings that are more specific and hence likely to occasion a serious response. Unless allowances are made for the possibility of an erroneous or ill-timed warning, few scientists will be willing to risk the opprobrium and litigation that could arise from open discussion. Thus, there is a conflict between the public's need for information and the scientists' need to be protected against threats to their livelihood. Unless some legal protection is forthcoming, the matter will most likely be resolved by the scientists retreating to an uninformative conservatism when asked to interpret their results in the public forum.—C. B. RALEIGH, *Earthquake Prediction Program, U.S. Geological Survey, Menlo Park, California 94025*

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