LETTERS

Information Services

In his letter (13 Aug., p. 586), Robert S. Willard of the Information Industry Association describes Philip H. Abelson's editorial "Essential federal information services" (28 May, p. 937) as being one-sided. Willard alleges that the National Library of Medicine (NLM) does not recover full costs of its online MEDLINE system and that NLM has in fact subsidized commercial organizations by $1 million over the period from January 1980 to June 1981. My purpose is to provide correct information on the pricing practices of NLM.

First, a General Accounting Office (GAO) audit of NLM charges released on 14 May 1982 found that NLM was recovering 96 percent of the costs of access to MEDLINE in its current price structure and that it was in conformance with guidelines in the Office of Management and Budget circular A-25 for charges to both profit and nonprofit organizations.

With respect to the allegation of a $1-million subsidy of commercial users by NLM, the list of 20 commercial users includes two who have been under contract with federal agencies that ultimately pay the bill. A third has established a special free information service for research investigators and clinicians among its clients and accounts for about 90 percent of the use by that company. If these "commercial" users are excluded, it reduces by one-third the commercial use referred to by Willard as being subsidized.

Also, it appears that Willard has not used the current pricing structure of NLM, which has been in effect since October 1981. The data he refers to go back 2½ years.

The so-called private sector charges which he uses for comparison are based on a hypothetical average of the maximum charges without considering discounts of up to 50 percent that could and would accrue to these users. If the lowest (rather than the highest) charge for obtaining similar services from the private sector were used, charges would be reduced by a factor of 4 and the difference between charges made by NLM and those made by the private sector would be only a small fraction of those alleged.

Regarding subsidizing charges for MEDLINE searches to foreign users, NLM does not provide these services. They are provided by foreign agencies, selected by their respective governments, or by U.S. commercial vendors. These organizations pay for use of NLM tapes or for access to our computers. The fee schedule for users is set by the agencies providing the service. A search for which the NLM domestic charge would be $7.28 exclusive of telecommunication charges would translate to a charge for foreign users that could range from $9 to $25. This does not support Willard's allegation that NLM is also subsidizing information services to private foreign health professionals.

Willard's complaints are similar to those raised by a foreign commercial company that is seeking to force higher NLM charges. Physicians and scientists may legitimately ask whether NLM charges are too low or whether the charges of some commercial information services are too high.

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Solar Gel Ponds

We read with interest Thomas H. Maugh II's article "Solar with a grain of salt" (Research News, 11 June, p. 1213). Solar ponds have the potential for providing domestic and low-grade process heat and electric power in a remarkably cost-effective manner.

As Maugh indicates, salt gradient ponds and the more recent concepts involving liquid layers of any kind suffer from a number of disadvantages. These include (but are not limited to) loss of stratification because of diffusion and convective mixing; the large environmental hazard posed to many locations by the tons of salt required; the need to maintain the gradient (requiring external processing of saline); and the development of turbidity, color, and optical opacity due to suspended dirt, debris, and occasionally algal and fungal growth. Mixing can also result from boiling, encroachment of the bottom (convective) zone onto the top (nonconvective) zone, withdrawal (surface evaporation) and injection of fluids, and even large falling bodies.

The gel pond concept was recently developed (*1*) at the University of New Mexico in an attempt to negate many of these difficulties. The gel solar pond consists basically of two zones. The bottom (convective) zone is homogeneous and nearly saturated saline. The top (nonconvective) zone consists of a very viscous