

## Random Samples:

### Science and the Democrats

Science just managed to sneak into the Democratic nominating convention in July. On Wednesday night, during the nomination for Massachusetts Governor Michael S. Dukakis, a man could clearly be seen milling around in a number of delegations with a large red and white sign reading "Super Collider, Super Mistake." The reverse side read "No SSC."

Not everyone agreed. The same night, as the roll was being called, the chairman of the Arizona delegation began the state's vote count by saying "Arizona, the ideal place for the SSC. . . ."

### Adopt a Scientist

Many Americans have gotten into the habit of "adopting" Pet Rocks and Cabbage Patch dolls. A new mental health group has developed an innovative program it hopes will get people hooked on adopting scientists.

The National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia and Depression has a new Adopt-a-Scientist program to link contributors with promising young researchers in the field of mental illness.

The Chicago-based alliance is a 2-year-old coalition of psychiatrists, scientists, and private citizens interested in advancing

research on the two major psychiatric disorders.

What do you get for your money? Well, \$25 to \$50 gets you a wallet-sized photo of a scientist you choose from a list of ten NARSAD fellows. For \$51 to \$100 you get an additional 8 by 10 inch glossy. Give more than \$100 and you get both photos plus a written description of your scientist's work. Shell out \$1000 or more and you get all the above, plus updates on your scientist's work and an invitation to a NARSAD symposium.

Contributions go into the general fund to support research projects. Since NARSAD's administrative costs are covered by private funds, 100% of the donations go toward research grants, which totaled \$250,000 to 10 fellows last year and \$600,000 to 24 fellows this year. An annual \$50,000 prize is also awarded. A panel of 25 prominent mental health researchers makes the awards. So far, NARSAD reports, about \$3500 has come in for adoptable scientists.

To adopt *your* very own scientist (or, perhaps, to put yourself up for adoption) contact NARSAD at 208 South LaSalle Street, Suite 1428, Chicago, IL 60604.

### Can't Stand Up for Falling Down

Georgia Tech has researchers who are really falling down on the job. In fact, they're being paid to do so.

Fall down steps, to be precise. And they usually get other people to do it for them. John

### *"It is much more exciting not to catch a big fish than not to catch a little fish."*

—Albert Szent-Györgyi, on his practice of taking on only large scientific questions. Attributed to him by Teru Hayashi at a symposium in Szent-Györgyi's memory at the Marine Biological Laboratory at Woods Hole, part of the laboratory's centennial celebration.

Templer and Deborah Hyde are investigating ways to make stairs ("the most dangerous consumer product after the automobile," says Hyde) safer. Hyde recounts little-known stair facts to prove her point:

- Stair injuries occur once in every 72,000 uses.

- Each year 1.8 to 2.6 million stair-related injuries occur in the United States.

- More people fall *up* stairs than down them. It's just that the downward trips hurt more.

Templer and Hyde have been paying volunteers \$15 to don a flight suit with special padding and climb into a modified parachute harness. Then the volunteers walk up and down a special set of stairs. At randomly selected intervals, one of the stairs collapses, and so do the volunteers. Safety devices keep the volunteers from getting hurt, while high-speed cameras catch the action. The photos are then used to develop a computer simulation of the art of falling down.

The resulting data are the first on what actually happens during a fall, Hyde says. Before stairs can be made safer, researchers need to know how people fall. One possible answer to reducing stairway injuries, she says,

is the use of

new energy-absorbing materials similar to those now padding basketball backboards.

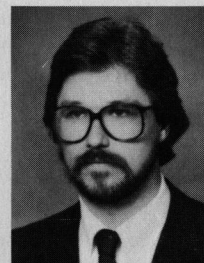
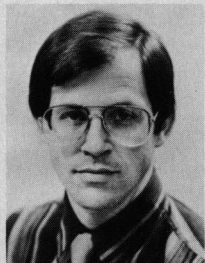
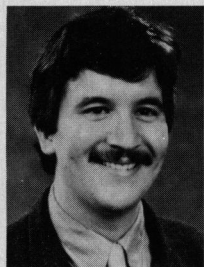
How did the volunteers like it? "Most of them really enjoyed it after the first time," Hyde said. "It was kind of fun."

### Required Reading

For years, physicists Stephen Hawking and Kip Thorne have had a wager going over whether or not a black hole exists in Cygnus X 1, a system consisting of a normal star revolving around an unseen companion. Hawking, who's built much of his career on black hole theory, bet Thorne that the companion isn't a black hole. He calls the bet "an insurance policy" against his being wrong about their existence. Of course you can never be sure about a black hole; even if you could enter one to investigate you'd be "torn into spaghetti," as Hawking says.

But recent observations have convinced Hawking that while the companion must be very small, its mass must be too big for it to be a white dwarf or a neutron star, leaving just one possibility. "I now consider the evidence for black holes so compelling that I'm going to concede the bet," Hawking told an audience at University of California, Berkeley this spring. "I will give Kip Thorne a subscription to *Penthouse*."

■ GREGORY BYRNE



*Adopt-A-Scientist*