

## Letters

### Duesberg's PNAS Paper

I must clarify several points that were made in William Booth's News & Comment article of 10 February (p. 733) about the special editorial process accorded my recent paper in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (PNAS) on the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and AIDS (1). Clearly, I am very happy to see that *Science* has finally begun to pay attention to my case against HIV as the cause of AIDS. However, getting "a lot of ink" from pens like Booth's is a mixed blessing. It would have been better to get more ink for the impact of my arguments regarding the etiology of AIDS than for how dissenting minorities are discouraged by the current establishment. This whole incident shows how hard it is to get "ink" for the substance of a very debatable scientific issue, even in a noncommercial journal like PNAS.

In addition, the implication that some or many of the points made in my paper were published because PNAS editor Igor Dawid "lost just a touch of his fighting spirit" is unjustified. Although the reviewers held the opinion that these points were "somewhat misleading or incomplete," they did not provide a single literature citation or set of data to support their lengthy assertions based on currently popular assumptions. Dawid was himself kind enough to request such documentation, but he received no more than two vintage references (one from 1970, the other from 1977) that are now part of my final manuscript. It is for this reason that Dawid accepted my points as "legalistically correct." I believe that in a scientific paper it is "legalistically correct" to argue with documented facts, rather than assumptions, no matter how popular.

In addition, Booth presents Dawid's comment, "if you wish to make these unsupported, vague and prejudicial statements . . ." in a misleading context. This statement was limited to the discussion in an earlier draft of my paper of the apparently paradoxical distribution of HIV in the United States (>90% male). It was not applied to my paper as a whole. In the draft that was accepted by Dawid, this and all other critical points raised by the reviewers had been answered to his satisfaction.

Finally, I should correct the statement that "2000 articles printed in the *Proceedings* each year slip by without anonymous and rigorous peer review." Instead, the majority of those papers, namely all those from nonmembers, are subjected to two or more such

anonymous reviews. Even those contributed by members are read by at least one "knowledgeable colleague" (mine was read by two before being subjected to special scrutiny).

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#### REFERENCES

1. P. Duesberg, *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* **86**, 755 (1989).

### Proposition 65

Leslie Roberts' article about California's Proposition 65 (News & Comment, 20 Jan., p. 306) correctly notes that industry scare tactics about the new law are wearing thin. However, Bruce Ames is quoted to the effect that Proposition 65 regulates carcinogens at "incredibly low" levels. In fact, those levels are currently *higher*, not lower, than what the Environmental Protection Agency and the Food and Drug Administration, among others, have repeatedly pronounced for known carcinogens over the past 20 years of toxic chemical regulation.

Roberts also reports the industry campaign to have Proposition 65 erased by White House fiat, in the closing days of the Reagan Administration. Readers might be interested to know that the campaign failed, in part because an official White House study group concluded that industry's claims of harm were "vastly overstate[d]" and that the law's likeliest costs to producers would be "of the nature of product testing and quality control expenditures."

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### Tax on the Six-Cylinder Car

Daniel E. Koshland, Jr. (Editorial, 20 Jan., p. 281), proposes a proportional or progressive tax on automobiles on the basis of their fuel consumption. The benefits he lists are numerous: smaller deficits in the federal budget and foreign aid, cleaner air, and better care of the needy (this last a fine example of double-counting).

The same argument calls for progressive taxation of dwelling units: they too use fuel; and, to paraphrase Koshland on automobiles, most rooms in larger homes have less than one occupant. He appropriately remarks that if this kind of policy becomes widely accepted, it could be extended to

other areas (room temperatures? illumination? travel?).

Koshland's editorial presents by example his distinction between "national policy" and "personal peccadillo." Could he have confused the two?

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Koshland does not mention the fact that small cars are markedly more dangerous than big cars and particularly more dangerous in an environment that still contains some older large cars.

There is, however, another much more significant objection to the tax he proposes, assuming we are willing to change to more dangerous cars in order to save gasoline. After all, the car danger could be eliminated by lower speed limits, better enforcement of traffic regulations, and so on, but we would have taxed the wrong thing. We should be taxing the gasoline, not the car. The owner of the large car who drives very little is contributing less to pollution than the owner of a small car who drives a great deal.

Finally, Koshland denies that the tax on cars would be "regressive." Unfortunately either a tax on six-cylinder cars or a tax on gasoline is regressive. The poor tend to own older cars that are larger and less economical than the small new cars that are owned by the upper-income groups. Therefore, the poor pay more of either of these taxes.

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I experienced a definite déjà vu reading Koshland's editorial "A tax on sin: The six-cylinder car." What Koshland proposes is virtually identical to the vehicle tax plans long in existence in many of the Western European—and other—nations. In fact, his arguments closely parallel those made at the time the European levies were imposed.

One of the underlying reasons why European automobiles have traditionally been smaller, with smaller power plants, than those in the United States, may be traced directly to the registration tax approach in those nations. Briefly, the long-held European theory has been that the automobile is a luxury and should be taxed as such. The reasoning then was that the best measure of the "degree" of such luxury lay in the size (power) of the engine. Thus it followed that a steeply graduated levy on the displacement of the vehicle's power plant was the simplest