

# SCIENCE

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# LETTERS

## A Reader's Response

In his editorial "The reader response: Oyvey" (21 May, p. 1055), Daniel E. Koshland, Jr., discusses recent reader surveys in *Science* and the trouble that some readers have had with them. Koshland argues that despite the lack of proper statistical survey sampling techniques, the numbers generated by a reader survey are still valuable as a "gauge of the opinions of [Science's] most committed readers." Wrong. I, a mere unemployed planner, a tired housewife, knew better. What is gained is no useful information. Because the correct method for survey sampling was not used, one cannot say what the data mean. One does not know whether the data are in any way a gauge of reader opinion.

Is criticism of *Science's* lack of professionalism the "ultimate compliment?" No. Survey results (unlike anecdotal responses) should be reliable no matter what the source—newspapers, popular magazines, or *Science*.

If *Science* is not using statistical methods properly, it is wasting time, generating useless numbers, and encouraging what I have sadly come to call the "dumbing of America."

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**Response:** Even editors have a limit to their patience. We invented new nomenclature to distinguish reader responses (a self-selected response, an "oyvey") from an accurate statistical opinion survey, but we refuse to accept that a tabulation of reader responses contains "no useful information." Information of any sort can be useful as long as it does not pretend that it is more extensive or more important than its intrinsic worth. We encourage reader responses, many of which are original and illuminating, with no pretense that they were collected from an accurate, random selection of our readers.

Statisticians should remember they did not invent the word "survey," which, according to Webster's dictionary, can be used without mention of statistical analysis. Scientists can claim rights to "gene," "pimeson," and "nylon" because they invented these terms, but they cannot redefine a word in general usage and demand that only their own interpretation be used. We went along with the statisticians as a courtesy and contribution to their wishes. Mutual understanding would be desirable.

—Daniel E. Koshland, Jr.

## Dental Institute Report

Richard Stone's article "Dental institute report has NIH down in the mouth" (News & Comment, 21 May, p. 1069) quotes a few people who are unhappy with certain aspects of the report of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Envisioning the Future of the NIDR [National Institute of Dental Research] Intramural Research Program. I chaired this panel and would like to address their concerns.

A key recommendation of the panel is that

In keeping with the vision of its founders, [NIDR's] intramural research program should conduct research of ultimate relevance to dental, oral and craniofacial health. This should include basic research as well as the rapid transfer of research discoveries to clinical practice and public knowledge.

Nowhere in the report does the panel recommend a sharp shift toward applied research. The panel did not presume to prescribe specific research projects for the program, but did develop a list of categorical themes based on its assessment of the needs and challenges that lie ahead. Responsibility for developing and pursuing particular projects must lie with the program's new director and its senior scientists and, as the report points out, they must select carefully because the program cannot possibly cover all areas identified.

The NIDR has an excellent long-range research plan for the 1990s, in which both intramural and extramural scientists have critical roles to play. Our panel recognized the substantial strengths and potential of scientists in the intramural program and attempted to develop recommendations that would help them achieve their full potential. This would involve fundamental as well as clinically oriented research. I urge those interested to read the report (which is relatively brief). Copies are available from NIDR's Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Communications (telephone 301-496-6705, FAX 301-496-9988).

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Stone provides a balanced review of the unfortunate events at NIDR, but he does not parse the value of the points of view expressed. As a former member, and for the