RANDOM SAMPLES

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

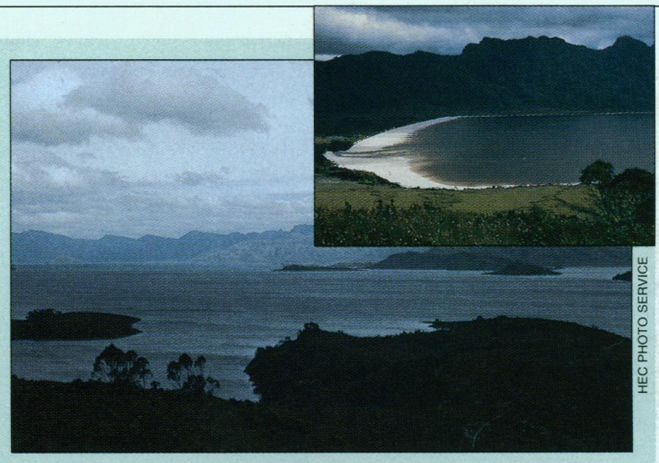
Switzerland Has Its Own Blood Scandal

First France, then Germany, now Switzerland...the aftershocks from Europe's HIV-contaminated blood scandals rumble on. In Geneva this month, Alfred Hässig, former head of the Swiss Red Cross Central Laboratory in Bern, was charged with causing "grievous bodily harm" by allowing HIV-tainted blood clotting factors to be distributed to Swiss hemophiliacs in 1985 and 1986.

The Swiss case resembles the French scandal, in which two former government physicians were jailed (*Science*, 23 July 1993, p. 422). In both cases, a national lab continued to distribute blood products that were known to be potentially infected with HIV. France stopped using such products in October 1985, but in Switzerland they were marketed until April 1986.

The suspect Swiss factors were made with blood collected some months before July 1985, when HIV testing became routine at Hässig's lab. His trial is likely to center on his failure to stop production of the factors in July 1985, when the New York Blood Center identified one HIV-positive sample among 3375 units of donated Swiss blood. But Hässig insists that no alternative supplies were available: "If these products would not have gone out, the hemophiliacs would have bled to death," he told *Science*.

Hässig, who retired at the end of 1986, faces trial sometime next year. The 73-year-old immunologist is no stranger to controversy, being among 450 signatories of a letter, "Rethinking AIDS," which questions whether HIV is the single cause of AIDS. The letter has been circulating among scientists for 2 years; many are supporters of Peter Duesberg, the University of California, Berkeley, virologist who claims that HIV's role in AIDS hasn't been proven. Hässig's unorthodox opinions seem likely to give his trial an unusual twist.



O. TRUCHANAS

HEC PHOTO SERVICE

Turning back the clock. Lake Pedder now and then (*inset*).

De-Development in Tasmania

Energy needs and ecology are facing off in Tasmania. For thousands of years, the eerily beautiful, pink quartzite beaches of Lake Pedder stood as a silent symbol of the glacial heritage of Australia's island state. But the government drowned that symbol in 1972, when it dammed the lake for hydroelectric power, seeking to bolster a sagging economy. Today, Lake Pedder is the object of an international campaign to restore it to its original state.

Supporters of Pedder 2000, as the campaign is called, say the dam has only been contributing to an existing energy surplus, and that its true future lies with eco-tourism. They have linked their cause to preparations for the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000, arguing that a restored lake could attract millions of "green" dollars. Limnologist Peter Tyler of Deakin University in Warrnambool, Victoria, has done a hydrological report showing that Pedder's beaches, dunes, and stream channels remain intact beneath 15 meters of water. Tyler says the lake's beauty might be recovered, as there is little sediment covering the submerged beaches, and meltwaters still surge through drowned stream channels in spring, keeping them free of debris. Phillip Williams of the International Rivers Network in Berkeley, California, adds that there is at least one encouraging precedent for undoing a dam: At California's New Melonas Dam on the Stanislaus River, abandoned 11 years ago, indigenous vegetation has repopulated the newly exposed shores.

But the Tasmanian government is so far holding firm against Pedder 2000. Even the environmental minister, John Cleary, has called the Pedder scheme "harebrained." Officials say it would wipe out a $150-million investment that generates $25 million a year. They don't deny the energy surplus, but say the dam, one of three permanent storages, is vital to energy security. Still, activists hope that an international cast of thousands, including the Duke of Edinburgh and prominent Canadian naturalist David Suzuki, will persuade Tasmania that its famous lake will serve posterity better as a natural wonder than as a power plant.

Kinder, Gentler ATOC?

Plans for a $35-million experiment to measure global ocean warming using sound waves have been revamped because of public concerns about the effects of the sounds on marine mammals (*Science*, 15 April, p. 339).

Swamped by protests, the National Marine Fisheries Service in March put off issuing a research permit for the project, Acoustic Thermometry of Ocean Climate (ATOC). After powows with environmentalists, ATOC scientists announced the new plan at a 16 May public hearing in Santa Cruz, California. It entails beefed-up efforts to determine whether low-frequency sound will disrupt the feeding and breeding of whales, dolphins, and other denizens of the deep. These experiments will now be conducted prior to the climate research. If no significant adverse effects are seen, ATOC oceanographers, led by Walter Munk of Scripps Institution of Oceanography in La Jolla, California, will then proceed with the original climate studies, which use speed of sound waves to reflect temperature variations.

The revised protocol includes extensive aerial, ship, and acoustic surveys of all marine mammal species at the two sites from which sound waves will be sent out: off the coast of Point Sur, California, and Kauai, Hawaii. The biologists, led by Daniel Costa of the University of California at Santa Cruz and Christopher Clark of Cornell University, will compare the animals' behavior when the sound is turned on and off. A new citizens' advisory board will join a panel of research advisers to decide whether it's safe to proceed. The initial studies, however, won't begin for before fall—about 8 months past the original start dates.

Brazil Debates R&D Funding Priorities

Research in Brazil could be facing a major change in direction as a result of three new studies that call on the government to devote more of its R&D spending to joint projects with private industry—a sector that now pays for only 15% of the nation's R&D effort.

The reports, ordered by the Ministry of Science and Technology and presented at a conference earlier this month in São Paulo, point out that government research priorities have traditionally favored large, high-prestige public-sector projects such as power plants and the national nuclear program. While these

endeavors strengthened Brazil's economy, they also produced work that was "not of the highest scientific quality," according to Simon Schwartzman, a political scientist at the University of São Paulo and author of one of the studies. Now, said Schwartzman, "it is necessary to leave behind the nationalism of the 1970s."

The studies say the government needs to bolster new companies like Biotechnics, started last year by biologists at the Federal University of Minas Gerais to produce environmentally benign solvents. One of those scientists, Lenore Nunes Ludolf Condes, is engaged in research on a resin to dissolve heavy-metal mining wastes, but, she says, "we are still waiting for funding from a public agency."

Academic scientists are not necessarily happy with the proposed new direction. Aziz Ab'Saber, president of the Brazilian Society for the Progress of Science, doesn't go along with Schwartzman. "Basic research comes first," he says. "It's absurd to let the market determine the technologies in a country." He added that too many companies just want government handouts and are not willing to invest in research.

The fate of the reports hinges on the outcome of the presidential election this fall. The current frontrunner, Luis Inacio da Silva of the Workers' Party, favors sticking with the traditional government-funded projects, which could help maintain researchers' status quo. His chief challenger, Social Democrat Fernando Henrique Cardoso, is more likely to support the proposed new focus.

Hot Dog Hazards

Parents worried about whether electromagnetic fields (EMFs) cause cancer now have a more all-American concern: Hot dogs, warns a study from the University of Southern California (USC), are more than 4 times as likely as EMFs to be linked with childhood leukemia. But the researchers caution that the data may not cut the mustard.

In the May issue of *Cancer Causes and Control*, three research groups report a link between cured-meat consumption and cancer. The most striking evidence comes from a group led by USC epidemiologist John Peters, which earlier found that EMF exposure is associated with a doubling of the risk for childhood leukemia. Among the 232 cases in the study, children who ate 12 or more hot dogs a month were nine times as likely as hot dog–free controls to develop leukemia. Peters also found an increased risk for kids whose fathers ate a lot of hot dogs.

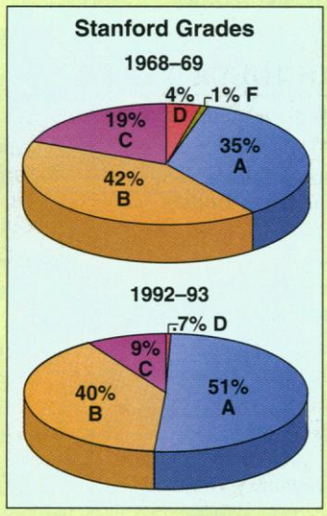
Not that Mom can eat with impunity either: The other two studies linked maternal intake of hot dogs and cured meats during pregnancy with childhood brain tumors. Looking at 234 cases of various childhood cancers, University of North Carolina epidemiologist David Savitz found that children whose mothers downed hot dogs at least once a week were more than twice as likely as controls to develop brain tumors. And in a study at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, epidemiologist Greta Bunin found a weak link between maternal hot dog intake during pregnancy and increased risk of a brain tumor, astrocytic glioma, in their children.

The epidemiologists say that the effects they observe could be from the N-nitroso compounds in cured meats, such as nitrites, which cause cancer in lab animals. And that makes sense, says Savitz, because vitamins—with their carcinogen-fighting antioxidant properties—appear to have a protective effect in juvenile hot dog eaters.

Savitz warns that the studies are far from conclusive. They all suffer from a lack of data on subjects' exposures to other N-nitroso compounds. And, says Bunin, "the cured-meat association could be an indicator of a diet poor in other ways." What's needed now, Savitz says, is research looking more closely at diet. "Who knows, maybe it's the condiments," he says.

Fighting Grade Inflation

Grades, especially in elite universities, have become badly devalued over the past 25 years in attempts to reduce students' obsession with marks and encourage them to take more challenging courses. But now Stanford University, one of the first to outlaw the D, is making tentative moves toward bringing back bad grades.



STANFORD UNIVERSITY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Gradeflation. It takes some serious goofing off to get a D at Stanford these days. Its restoration a few years ago has had little effect on grading.

A university committee has put out a report on "grading practices" which suggests introducing a new euphemism—NP for "not passed"—for F, which was also banished in the 1970s. Transcripts are currently mum about failures, showing only that a student has not received credit for a course. The Committee on Academic Appraisal and Achievement is also calling for limits on retaking courses. Students now can take a course until they come up with a mark they like. Under proposed changes, only those who get a C or worse can repeat a course, and repeats go on the record.

Grade inflation is much less pronounced in science and engineering than in the social sciences and humanities, says committee chair Gail Mahood, professor of geological and environmental sciences. Nevertheless, she says, "there is concern on campus that we're driving people out of the sciences" and into easier-grading fields. The faculty senate was scheduled to vote on the changes on 26 May. Mahood says the "minor tinkering" being contemplated is not expected to spur teachers to hand out more Cs and Ds. But, says Robert Simoni, chair of the biology department and member of the faculty senate, it's in tune with the results of recent surveys among both faculty and students. There's a growing sentiment, he says, that "grades ought to be an honest reflection of student accomplishment."

What's that, Grampa? Above is the logo used by the Pennsylvania Department of Education on documents promoting science education. And what's the ruler-like contraption? An alert physics professor from a Pennsylvania university, who called the curiosity to *Science*'s attention, writes that "we had one of the icons—which we couldn't understand—interpreted by an ancient professor emeritus as a 'slide rule'!" The Keystone State adopted the logo in 1989, more than a decade after most people had replaced the slide rule with pocket calculators. When asked about the image, Pennsylvania education officials were amused. Said one: "At least it wasn't an abacus."