LETTERS

From a distance

"If you want to be on television, tell them what you think they want to hear," says a researcher who is skeptical of evidence of past life on Mars (right). Other writers state that "fast transfers (taking less than a year)" of ejecta "from Mars to Earth must have occurred numerous times during Earth's past." On other topics, "sociobiological research programs (by whatever name)" are said to have "prospered." And "restoring and strengthing cellular immunity" is advocated as a strategy for curing AIDS, as opposed to "treating the consequences" of the disease with drugs.

Mars Media Mayhem

As lead author of a recent report (*1*) advising the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) on a strategy for the search for evidence of life on Mars, I was besieged for most of the first week of August by media representatives needing an instant opinion on the Research Article by D. McKay *et al.* (16 Aug., p. 924).

First, I should note that I am convinced that the search for evidence of ancient life on Mars is a rational exercise with a reasonable probability of success, but that I am equally convinced that the paper by McKay *et al.*, although an excellent study of martian chemistry and mineralogy, fell far short of establishing the case for evidence of biological activity in martian meteorite ALH84001. Thus, my responses to the media reflected a high degree of skepticism concerning the conclusions of McKay *et al.*

The printed media and radio seemed to have no problem with my skepticism, asking generally sensible and pertinent questions and making use of a significant amount of the material I provided. The television networks, on the other hand, were less receptive. Interviews that I taped for NBC News and ABC News were not used. The programs that were aired by NBC and ABC were relentlessly upbeat and contained only token criticism of the "pro-life" interpretation. Planned appearances on CNN and ABC Nightline were abruptly cancelled after my skepticism had been made public.

For scientists facing such a situation in future, the bottom line seems to be, if you want to be on television, tell them what you think they want to hear. If you want the public to know the truth, stick to print and radio.

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References

1. *An Exobiological Strategy for Mars Exploration* (NASA SP-530, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Washington, DC, 1995).

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Mars Meteorite Transfer: Simulation

The possible detection of ancient life in martian meteorite ALH84001 (D. McKay *et al.*, Research Article, 16 Aug., p. 924) raises questions about the likelihood that microorganisms might have been transported between Earth and Mars (*1*). A related question is whether martian samples (to be returned by future spacecraft missions) should be sterilized in order to protect Earth from possible contamination. The survivability of such organisms on their journey between planetary habitats would depend on the flight time, which determines the dose of damaging cosmic rays and ultraviolet radiation, and the sample size, which might protect a meteorite's interior from radiation and from the heat of atmospheric entry.

In an attempt to understand the distribution of cosmic-ray exposure ages of the dozen known martian meteorites, we numerically simulated the orbital histories of more than 2000 particles launched from Mars at speeds slightly above escape (B. J. Gladman *et al.*, Research Article, 8 Mar., p. 1387); these particles were followed as their orbits evolved as a result of close planetary encounters and distant perturbations of all