should be realized that only 11 months have elapsed since publication of our results (2); if one takes into account the time period required for gestation in sheep (5 months), one sees that it is unlikely that other authors would yet have had time to complete similar experiments and publish data.

Retrospectively, we and our co-authors realize that if the use of these cells for nuclear transfer had been anticipated, the skepticism of Sgaramella and Zinder could have been allayed by reference to an original donor tissue sample deposited with a respected neutral third party.

We were always aware that there would be some skepticism about our results and have been greatly encouraged by the positive reaction of the scientific community. We would like to think that this reflects the integrity with which we are accredited by our scientific peers. To us, as practicing scientists, this accolade is of paramount importance.

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Reactor Startup

In ScienceScope of 19 December (p. 2045), an item under the heading "No votes from research reactor?" relates to problems at the High-Flux Beam Reactor at Brookhaven National Laboratory and refers to a 22 November letter from the Basic Energy Sciences Advisory Committee (BESAC) to Martha Krebs summarizing recommendations from our public meeting on 30 July to 1 August that reviewed the issues.

The BESAC recommended that a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) should be undertaken before restarting the reactor; we had been advised that this could be completed in 15 months after a decision to undertake it. The EIS was recommended to help in reassuring the local community that all care is being taken; the implication that it is a delaying tactic for political reasons could not be farther from the truth. We recommended that actions should be planned to achieve a prompt restart after an acceptable outcome of the EIS, but we expressly did not recommend undertaking a $150-million upgrade. This upgrade was proposed in an earlier study undertaken at the request of the Office of Basic Energy Sciences, which reported in January 1996, as part of a study to explore alternatives to expanding the neutron research capabilities after the cancellation of the Advanced Neutron Source project. In our discussions, we drew from that earlier report, produced by a subcommittee chaired by Robert Birgeneau, to illustrate the scientific importance of neutron scattering studies, but we were careful in our recommendations to make it clear that the upgrade proposed in the Birgeneau study was not being recommended as part of the restart we advocated.

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Response: Stringer is correct that a previous panel, and not his, recommended the $150-million upgrade. Stringer's group did call for the reactor's power to be boosted from 30

megawatts to 60 megawatts. As for the restart, however, no one disagrees that the EIS was to be completed before the reactor can be brought back on line. Energy Secretary Frederico Peña maintained until December that he would decide this month whether or not to restart the reactor after the EIS is complete. His delay, our sources said and continue to say, has more to do with the November elections than with the EIS completion.

Andrew Lawler

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Methylmercury Risks

Grace M. Egeland and John P. Middaugh (Policy Forum, 12 Dec., p. 1904) suggest that the benefits from essential nutrients in fish may counterbalance neurotoxicity caused by prenatal methylmercury exposure. Although this question deserves renewed attention, it should be noted that the risk balance is not static. While methylmercury toxicity is expected to follow a dose-response relationship, it is not clear whether an increased benefit can be derived during pregnancy from eating seafood beyond a certain minimal level (*1*). Mercury toxicity may therefore outweigh the benefits, especially when consumption of contaminated seafood is high. We have studied 900 children prenatally exposed to methylmercury (2). Although selenium averaged a 10-fold molar excess above mercury, selenium concentrations in cord blood did not confer protection against mercury-associated deficits in intellectual function. However, as mentioned by Egeland and Middaugh, the visual system seems not to have been affected by mercury toxicity in Faroese children (*2*), perhaps because of protective effects of essential fatty acids from seafood. Nonetheless, other brain functions of the children were not similarly protected (*2*).

Neurotoxicity caused by prenatal exposures is of special concern, because it is likely to be irreversible. Egeland and Middaugh quote only the beginning of a sentence from our paper (*2*), and the literature reference given (no. 27) appears to be incorrect. The quotation from our paper should have continued as follows: "regression coefficients suggest that a doubling in mercury exposure may cause a developmental delay of approximately 2 months for several functions."

Tertiary prevention should not stand alone. We strongly recommend other measures, whenever possible. Although the Policy Forum was published 1 week before the scheduled release of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) report on mercury (*3*), a draft of this report was mentioned in relation to the reference dose for mercury. We applaud EPA for this study (available at www.epa.gov/airlinks) and for identifying the most important potential effects of limiting the anthropogenic mercury releases to the environment. Mercury pollution from the United States and other countries causes increased exposures to this toxic metal, particularly in northern populations, like the Faroese. Egeland and Middaugh indicate their affiliation with the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, but Alaskans would be ill advised if they abandoned their demand for safe food.

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