

## RANDOM SAMPLES

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

### Healthy Pit Stop

If you are obsessed with your weight or vital signs, set your fanny on Japan's toilet of the future. Sit down and it weighs you. Grip the armrests and it checks your body fat. Urinate and it analyzes how much sugar you're excreting.

Japan's ultratoilet is just one of the spanking-new features of "Warp Square Hill House," a model home of the next century now on display in a Tokyo research center. The sensor-laden geek nest was built by Matsushita Electric Industrial Co. to promote home networks and appliances that enable houses to run on autopilot.

If you can't upload enough data from your toilet, the warp house offers a laptop-sized portable device that can check your pulse rate, temperature,



Smart house, on display at Matsushita (inset: intelligent toilet).

and blood pressure. Are your parameters a bit off? Pressing a button whisks your stats to a physician in a far-away smart office, who might ask you to stick a tiny wand-mounted camera in your mouth so he can look at your throat.

Your house could then step in to take care of you. Doctor's recommendations could be relayed to a kitchen computer that would check the contents of your refrigerator, order groceries, look up recipes on the

gee-whiz appeal may not be enough to get consumers to pay for the wiring—which would add 5% or so to the cost of a new home—let alone buy the smart appliances. Matsushita's Hisashi Kodama says his group is still searching for a "killer application" that would give home networks mass consumer appeal. Still, the company hopes to begin working out industry-wide standards for home networks by year end.

Internet, and program the microwave. A host of other amenities handle routine functions, like monitoring who's ringing the doorbell or figuring out the most efficient use of energy.

Company executives admit that the gadgets'

### Pingers: Alarms or Dinner Bells?

It seemed simple: To prevent marine mammals from becoming ensnared in fishing nets, scare them away with high-pitched noisemakers. But now it appears that for some species, acoustic "pingers" do more harm than good.

Each year some 80,000 dolphins and thousands of other marine mammals are snagged in nets worldwide; most die. Two years ago, a report in *Nature* suggested that pingers, which emit periodic high-frequency underwater bursts, had markedly reduced the accidental catch of harbor porpoises in the Gulf of Maine's groundfish fishery.

Why pingers work is still a mystery: They may cause discomfort, interfere with marine mammals' echolocation, or become associated with nets. Nonetheless, at least 14 more fisheries around the world have recently adopted the devices.

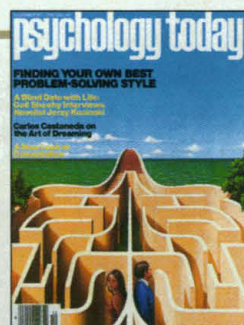
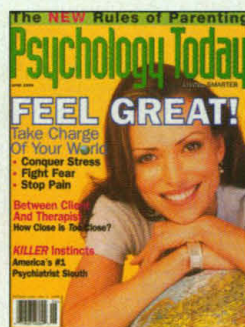
Now one of the authors of the *Nature* paper warns, in the spring issue of the *Marine Technology Journal*, that pingers may produce "a whole array of unintended consequences." For example, writes Scott Kraus of the New England Aquarium's Edgerton Research Laboratory, at one mid-Atlantic shad fishery, pingers drove away shad as well as porpoises even though the shad weren't supposed to be affected by the sounds. In the Pacific Northwest, salmon aquaculturists found that devices intended to fend off marauding seals instead became seals' "dinner bells." And Kraus cites preliminary evidence that New Zealand's endangered Hector's porpoises may actually be attracted to the pings. "Every fishery is different," writes Kraus, who says it is best to play it safe and run a trial wherever pingers are under consideration.

Having been transformed from a powerful voice on the science of the mind to a self-help mag, *Psychology Today* is about to get some therapy of its own. The bimonthly magazine's owners announced last week that they are bringing in psychologist and creativity researcher Robert Epstein to revamp a 32-year-old magazine that has gone from a 1.75-million circulation

### Rehab for Psychology Mag

A professor at United States International University in San Diego, Epstein has been associated with the magazine, owned by Sussex Publishing of New York, for a year as host of the *Psychology Today* radio show. As editor, he says, he won't allow any more Jackie Onassis spreads or hyped-up covers like that on the June issue ("Feel Great! Take Charge of Your World"). "As long as I'm running the magazine, there'll never be another cover like that," he says. Instead, Epstein plans to commission stories by and about "top authorities" in psychology, with the mag's overall direction charted by a "blue-ribbon advisory board" of academic psychologists. The new look will debut with the September issue.

Psychologists are hoping Epstein's appointment marks a new era. "If it isn't a significant change of course, I will dissociate myself from it rather quickly," says Duke University's Greg Kimble, a member of Epstein's panel who advised the magazine when the American Psychological Association owned it in the 1980s. Adds Kraut: "One can only hope this new incarnation will fulfill its earlier promise."



Psychology Today in 1977 ▲ and now.