

AIDS

SIR—In his letter on the origin of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) (*Nature* 318, 100; 1985) Joseph Rosenior says that Japan was “virtually cut off economically and politically from the rest of the world until the latter part of the eighteenth century. There was hardly any commercial trade between Japan and Africa before the twentieth century.”

This elimination of other possible sources is precisely why the epidemiological studies of HTLV carriers, and the associated incidence of adult T-cell leukaemia/lymphoma (ATLL), in south-west Japan, are so strongly supportive of the hypothesis that the virus was introduced to Nagasaki by the Portuguese missionaries and traders in the 16th century; in particular, by the black Africans who came with them, and had frequent contact with local prostitutes. The historical roots of the still strong correlation ($r = 0.92$) between the incidence of ATLL and the density of Catholics are described in a letter by Hino *et al.*¹, with independent evidence clearly supportive of the suggestion by Gallo *et al.*² which Mr Rosenior criticizes.

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1. Hino, S. *et al. Lancet* ii, 572 (1984).
2. Gallo, R.C. *et al. Lancet* ii, 962–963 (1983).

SIR—The letter from Fox and Cottler-Fox (*Nature* 319, 8; 1986) is scare-mongering although I would not deny that acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) is a worrisome new disease, and that as physicians we are relatively powerless against it at present. This has raised much speculation and controversy, some of which has been published in your columns.

Recently, it has been advised that donors of corneas to be used for transplantation in the United Kingdom should be screened for antibodies for LAV/ITLV III (lymphadenopathy-associated virus/human T-lymphotropic virus type III) and that material from those with antibodies should not be used. This advice has been widely heeded¹. Thus the supply of human corneas has been suddenly reduced, although the extent has yet to become apparent.

Although diseases such as rabies or Creutzfeldt–Jacob² syndrome can be transferred by corneal transplantation, a recent comprehensive review of the clinical manifestations of HTLV-III infection mentioned no evidence that AIDS can be transmitted in this way³.

It will thus be seen that AIDS has been added to the list of diseases where scare-

mongering has resulted in harm to patient care. This is always regrettable and reprehensible.

I do not entirely exclude the possibility that corneal transplantation might be a means of transmitting HTLV-III, merely that no such data yet exist. Furthermore, I do not believe that any scientist should fear being proved wrong by subsequent events. On the other hand, I do believe very strongly that it is wrong to make pronouncements or take actions which affect patients on the basis of no relevant data.

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1. Ritten, S. *Br. med. J.* 292, 62 (1986).
2. Kanski, J. *Clinical Ophthalmology*, 5.26, (Butterworths, London, 1984).
3. Melbye, M. *Br. med. J.* 292, 5–12 (1986).

Is a test ban unrealistic?

SIR—I note with concern your bald statement (*Nature* 319, 164; 1986) that “...aiming for a test ban now is...unrealistic. That task is for 1988...”

Why so? Surely there could be no more expeditious time than the present for such a critical move. A test ban is the most logical step to balanced multilateral nuclear disarmament, something that is supposed to appeal to all. Those who profess that the technical obstacles to confident verification are political, not technical, now greatly outnumber those who insist otherwise (at least outside the weapons laboratories and the Thatcher and Reagan administrations). Furthermore, we have a Soviet administration desperate for a reciprocal step to match its extended testing moratorium and its offer of on-site inspections of test sites and laboratories. Even if we adopt a cynical stance, the Soviet Union is highly vulnerable to having its bluff called. Either way, we would be foolish to sit back, prevaricate, and let the opportunities pass as our leaders seem to be intent on doing.

There is another reason. A Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty would stop nuclear weapons spreading sideways, as well as upwards. In signing the Non-Proliferation Treaty, some 80 per cent of the United Nations membership agreed not to develop nuclear weapons *provided* the United States, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union undertook to cease the arms race. Their disillusion is now tangible: all we three have done these past 15 years is escalate. Now it seems that the Soviets, at least, have lost their appetite. Even if they are ahead of us in megatonnage, as is commonly argued by those in favour of going ahead with development of the new generation of Western missiles,

the overkill capability of both sides renders the argument irrelevant. No, too much money is involved in the weapons industry, too many clever people in the weapons laboratories are intent on retaining their empires, too much inertia is built into the politicians' ability to regulate the race even if they had the will to do so. And too many scientists lose their intellectual honesty when lucrative defence contracts are proffered for fantastic schemes. We must break the chain. The test ban would be the way to start doing it. 1988 may be too late.

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Metric system

SIR—R.J. Bird's criticism (*Nature* 319, 8; 1986) of the metric system on the ground that it is more likely than the Imperial system to lead schoolchildren to mathematical ambiguities is invalid. His argument, in fact, has nothing to do with the metric system. 16 cm^2 and $(16 \text{ cm})^2$ can certainly be ambiguous to a young mind, but the same confusion arises when one writes in^2 for the square inch, which is not uncommon.

British schoolchildren can be told to use s.c. instead of cm^2 just like the more familiar c.c. for cm^3 until they come to realize the logical superiority of the notation cm^2 . The use of s.c. can be recommended outside elementary schools as well if need be.

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SIR—It is a rather strange experience to watch the defence for the non-metric traditions of the Anglo-American culture. The astonishing thing is not that some people cling to tradition, but that they sincerely believe that the metric units are almost meaningless when it comes to describing the physical world in immediately understandable terms. I can assure you that to a person who lives in a country that has been metric for generations, it is the system used in the United States and Britain that seems ridiculous—especially the Fahrenheit system so hotly defended by Mark W. Steele (*Nature* 318, 596; 1985). The obvious conclusion must be that the metric system serves as well for laymen when a transition period is over. In this country, acres, feet, gallons, pints and °F are as confusing to ordinary people as British thermal units are to physicists.

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