broadcast science

Radio components

On Saturday afternoons, BBC Radio 4 has recently been providing a "Dial a Scientist" programme which gives a genuine insight into what the radio customer wants, in scientific terms. Questions asked recently include:

- Why do stars twinkle?
- Why is water wet?
- Why do African elephants have larger ears than do Indian elephants?
- Why does the hair of babies change colour?
- What is the twin paradox?
- Why has the Earth not cooled down?

This kind of programme should be compulsory listening for all producers of science programmes. There clearly is a broad interest in science, which BBC Radio is still not catering for satisfactorily. In particular, perhaps it is not too late for "Kaleidoscope" to live up to its description as Radio 4's nightly review of the arts and sciences. The only thing wrong with the science on "Kaleidoscope" is that often one feels the need of a microscope to find any; perhaps the recent arrival of "Scientifically Speaking" (see *Nature* **247**, 411; 1974 for a review) will be taken as a spur to show that, at least in the 'science is fun' department, "Kaleidoscope" can do for the layman what John Maddox seems to be trying to do for the professional scientist.

Welcome surprise

David Davies

Independent Television served up an unexpected offering on January 31—half an hour on anorexia nervosa—and on this showing they should chance their arm more often on science and medicine. Certainly there are enough diseases to keep British viewers fascinated for a whole season.

The programme was written, produced and directed by Robin Brown and it was a brave job, although one suspects he could have done with a bigger budget. As it was the presentation fell between two stools. The disease, a compulsive teenage refusal to eat adequately, was clearly described early on, and this would have made an excellent fifteen minute documentary, one of a series. But Mr Brown's imagination, or pocket, did not stretch to half an hour and so things got thinner as time went on. With such a length of programme it is necessary to go into some detail—is it a complaint of the well-off only, how many actually die of it, how many later lead a perfectly normal life, how does it divide amongst the sexes? One hardly got the impression that it had been difficult cramming everything in.

Moreover, there was a strange air of unreality to many of the scenes. If viewers can take starving Ethiopians, they can presumably also take over-slim English girls, yet none of those shown looked in any great distress; in fact they all seemed to have got better before being filmed. Two minutes with someone visibly suffering would have got the story over very effectively. This lack of verisimilitude was compounded by stilted dialogue.

There was, however, one quite extraordinary moment. Anorexia nervosa is a complaint which tends to involve and confuse the family and generate strange family situations in which powerful forces are abroad but are manifested in odd material ways. A mother was filmed reminiscing with her daughter about spraying wash basins and lavatory bowls with red ink to attempt to dissuade her from being sick in them and having to wash away the tell-tale markers. This was a stunning insight into the dilemma of the family and produced a chilly moment.

We were mercifully spared commercials till the end when we were exhorted to consume baby foods, thick soups and juicy oranges.

obituary

A. S. Romer

Dr Alfred Sherwood Romer, Emeritus Professor at Harvard University, who died on November 5, aged 78, became one of the most outstanding names in the history of Vertebrate Palaeontology. Graduating at Amherst he moved to Columbia University where he worked in the school of Professor W. K. Gregory and was first concerned with the leg musculature of dinosaurs. In 1923 he was called to the University of Chicago and here his major work was on the Pelycosauria. After many years of field work and laboratory study, and after publishing a series of papers, he wrote with L. I. Price, a brilliant artist, a monograph on these animals published in 1940, which is a model for such work. He also published valuable papers on other early reptiles and the amphibia, and he wrote a monograph on the labyrinthodonts in 1947 which will long remain the standard work on these animals.

In 1937 Romer sectioned the head of the fish *Ectosteorhachis* and, as a result, he immediately recognised the correctness of Westoll's solution to the problem of fish dermal bone nomenclature. He was a leading champion of the view that vetebrates evolved in fresh water. This reflects the constant attention he paid to the geological background of the animals he studied, work which resulted in a sound knowledge of the continental deposits of the Lower Permian of Texas on which he became a recognised authority.

Romer discussed usefully such troublesome matters as the nature of *Diadectes*, the origin of the Ichthyosauria, and the relationships of *Araeoscelis* and of the so-called Microsauria. It was Romer who realised that the phyllospondylous amphibia were not an independant order, as had long been held, but only the larvae of labyrinthodonts as was originally believed. He questioned the view that the rhachitomous vertebrae of labyrinthodonts were derived from the embolomerous type and was eventually able to demonstrate that the reverse was, in fact, true.

At an age when most palaeontologists have long ceased from active field work