

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-shm 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 mon-

ograph 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 vertebrates 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 *Dia-dectes*, the origin of the Ichthyosauria, and the relationships of *Araeoscelis* and of the so-called Microsauria. It was Romer who realised that the phyllospendylous amphibia were not an independent order, as had long been held, but only the larvae of labyrinthodonts as was originally believed. He questioned the view that the rachitinous vertebrae of labyrinthodonts were derived from the embolomere 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

Al Romer was making discoveries of new faunas in South America. This entailed hard physical exertions and resulted in the discovery of extremely important Middle Triassic faunas (missing from the classical South African Karroo) including both synapsid reptiles, long needed to illustrate fully the origin of mammals, and of new early archosaurs. These explorations resulted in a series of clearly written papers, showing the balanced judgement which characterised Romer's writings throughout his long working life.

One of Romer's greatest calls to fame lies in his text books. His *Vertebrate Palaeontology*, published in 1933 when no other such work existed in the English language, was an immediate success. It surveyed the whole field of vertebrate palaeontology with balance and judgement and was excellently illustrated and it was of the greatest help to all students of the subject. The accompanying *Man and the Vertebrates*, of a lesser standard, was intended to protect the publishers against a loss on the main work—which never occurred. His famous book was republished in 1945 and was almost entirely rewritten and reillustrated again by the author in 1966, thirty three years after the publication of the first edition! He also published in 1949 a book on the comparative anatomy of the vertebrates, called *The Vertebrate Body*, of great value to students, dealing with the embryology, osteology and dentitions (he once remarked "I hate teeth"), the circulatory system, the CNS, the myology and the digestive systems. Not content with that he published in 1956 his famous *Osteology of the Reptiles*, to replace the largely out of date work by Williston. Here, as in his *Vertebrate Palaeontology*, his name will long remain a familiar one on the shelves of zoological libraries. His last book, *The Procession of Life*, was published in English in 1968; it was published also in French, German and Italian and these Continental editions are superbly illustrated with many coloured plates.

Romer became Director of the Museum of Zoology at Harvard in 1946, having been Professor of Zoology and Curator of Vertebrate Palaeontology since 1934. He was Alexander Agassiz Professor of Zoology from 1947 until 1965 and was then elected Emeritus Professor. He was held in the greatest respect all around the world, which he travelled extensively, and was honoured by the award of an immense number of medals and honorary degrees. He was a Member of the Academy of Sciences, a Past President of the American Association for the Advancement of Science a Foreign Member of the Royal Society and an honorary member of many others.

When his research work, his teaching and his books are considered together

his contribution to vertebrate zoology can only be described as formidable.

A host of friends were indebted to him and his charming wife for their never failing help, kindness and hospitality.

Announcements

Appointments

P. C. Elwood has been appointed Director of the **Medical Research Council Epidemiology Unit** (South Wales).

Professor **J. Heslop-Harrison**, FRS, Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, has been elected **President** of the **Institute of Biology** for 1974.

Professor **J. H. Beynon**, senior research associate at ICI and professor of chemistry at Purdue University, Lafayette, has been appointed to a **Royal Society Research Professorship** at the **University College of Swansea, University of Wales**.

Sir Owen Saunders, FRS, Emeritus Professor of Mechanical Engineering at Imperial College, University of London, has been appointed **Royal Society Visiting Professor** at the **Engineering School of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro**.

Awards

The first **Tribology Bronze Medals** of the **Institution of Mechanical Engineers** have been awarded to **D. R. Adams, D. R. Garner** and **R. A. Onions**.

Aslib (formerly the Association of Special Libraries and Information Bureaux) is to mark its 50th anniversary in 1974 by the award of a prize of £250 and a piece of engraved silver for the best paper submitted in competition on *The Future Pattern of Information Services for Industry and Commerce*.

International Meetings

March 1, **Biodegradation of Town Refuse and Farm Wastes** (Marian Honer, Assistant Information Officer, University of Aston in Birmingham, Gosta Green, Birmingham B4 7ET)

March 4, **Catalysis and Inhibition of Oxidation Processes** (Dr R. F. Greenwood, Hon. Secretary, London Section, Society of Chemical Industry, Chemistry Department, The City University, St John Street, London EC 1V 4PB)

March 4-6, **Interim Meeting of the Society of Clinical Pathologists and the College of American Pathologists** (Steven K. Herlitz, Inc., 850 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022)

March 4-8, **25th Pittsburgh Conference on Analytical Chemistry and Applied Spectroscopy** (Robert W. Baudoux, Exposition Chairman, U.S. Steel Corporation, Research Laboratory, M.S. 57, Monroeville, Pennsylvania 15146)

March 5-6, **Noise Measurement and Control** (Course Organiser, Birmiehill Institute, National Engineering Laboratory, East Kilbride, Glasgow G75 0QU)

March 6, **Meeting of the Particle Size Analysis Group of the Society for Analytical Chemistry** (Analytical Division, Chemical Society 9/10 Savile Row, London W1X 1AF)

March 6-8, **Minicomputers: Fundamentals and Applications** (Lisa Spaducci, Polytechnic of Central London, 115, New Cavendish Street, London W1M 8JS)

March 7, **Component Interactions in Fluid Flow Systems** (A. J. Tugwell, 1, Birdcage Walk, Westminster, London, SW1H 9JJ)

March 11-15, **Chemical Society Management Studies for Chemists** (Dr M. D. Robinson, The Chemical Society, Burlington House, London W1V 0BN)

March 13, **Prediction of Geological Hazards** (Professor B. M. Funell, Environmental Sciences, University of East Anglia, Norwich NOR 88C)

March 14-15, **Heat Pipes** (The Short Course Unit, The Polytechnic of Central London, 35, Marylebone Road, London NW1 5LS)

March 18, **Microcalorimetry in Biology** (The Assistant Secretary, Society of Chemical Industry, 14, Belgrave Square London SW1X 8PS)

March 18-22, **6th Semi-Annual Short Course on Laser Safety** (Laser Safety Course, CONMED, 114 Medical College, Cincinnati, Ohio 45229)

March 19, **Group Technology: A Method for Improving Productivity** (Course Organiser, Birmiehill Institute, National Engineering Laboratory, East Kilbride, Glasgow G75 0QU)

March 21, **General Meeting of the Institution of Mining and Metallurgy** (The Geological Society, Burlington House, Piccadilly, London W1V 0JU)

March 20-21, **Computers in Medicine** (The Secretary, World Organisation of General Systems and Cybernetics, Blackburn College of Technology and Design, Feilden Street, Blackburn BB2 1LH)

March 20-22, **Tetrahedrally Bonded Amorphous Semiconductors** (Marc H. Brodsky, Conference Chairman, IBM Thomas J. Watson Research Center P.O. Box 218, Yorktown Heights, New York 10598)