

# correspondence

## International exchange

SIR,—The fourth European *Drosophila* Research Conference met in Umeå Sweden, in the Spring of 1974. It was a very interesting conference, which was attended by more than 150 Drosophilists from all over Europe. However, a certain disappointment was apparent among many of my colleagues, because no Drosophilists from the Soviet Union attended.

The fifth Conference will be held in Louvain-La-Neuve, Belgium, at the beginning of next September. As the organiser of the conference I really hoped that, as well as the other European *Drosophila* geneticists, a delegation from the USSR could attend the conference. Therefore, at the suggestion of an American colleague, I wrote last July to Academician Belyaev, who is President of the Soviet Society of Genetics, in order to obtain from him a list of his colleagues who might wish to attend the conference. I received a list of about 20 names last September.

At the beginning of January, I sent a first announcement and preliminary registration forms to all of them. At the same time I wrote to the Chairman of the USSR Academy of Sciences, inviting officially a delegation from the USSR to attend the conference. I got some answers from the Drosophilists of the USSR who were eager to attend.

Recently, however, I received a very short letter from the foreign relations department of the Academy telling me that the scientists of the Academy do not plan to attend the conference. It is hard to believe that it constitutes a final answer, especially as the XIV International Congress of Genetics is supposed to be held in the USSR in 1978. Are we to understand that the exchanges between geneticists from West and East Europe are only one way?

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## Birds on the Chagos Bank

SIR,—The recent communication from Hiron *et al.* (April 1, page 387) prompts this response. Their suggestions relative to rats and birds at Great Chagos Bank raise several questions. "Feral brown rats" (are those *Rattus norvegicus*?) are alleged to prevent full utilization of Eagle and Egmont islets by seabirds. The suggestion is made

that "warfarin" and Liverpool virus" be utilized to remove the rats.

While many studies of island situations have indicated the predatory impact of rats on nesting seabirds, this is not a universal relationship. Our own studies at Enewetak Atoll in the Marshall Islands have failed to produce evidence of predation by rats (*R. rattus* and *R. exulans*) on such colonies, which include one of more than 10,000 sooty terns.

Eradication of rats is difficult. If the rat colony is at all sizeable, the presence of the "warfarin" resistant gene is likely; and problems might well be encountered. I wonder whether the Liverpool virus is being confused with Salmonella bacteria, a now discounted mode of control. In this connection, the WHO caution against their use should be noted (FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Zoonoses, *Wld Hlth Org. techn. Rep. Ser.*, No. 378, 1967; WHO Scientific Group, Ecology and Control of Rodents of Public Health Importance, *Wld Hlth Org. techn. Rep. Ser.*, No. 553, 1974).

This suggests that the terrestrial ecology of those islets should be adequately understood before drastic management efforts are attempted. Knowing more of the "recent surveys" would be most helpful.

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## Cows and heart disease

SIR,—If a non-medico may presume to comment on coronary heart disease (Editorial, April 15), surely it is not the sacred cow that needs to carry a government health warning, but the golden car. Ignoring the nauseating exhaust products of the latter, I refer to the long term debilitating influence of car commuting. And not merely to confined physical inertia, but to the tremendous stresses involved in co-existence with one's neighbour within the relentless daily stream of traffic. To have a cyclist's eye-view in Boston, for example, is to see men possessed to a degree dangerously approaching that of mechanised Gadarene swine.

You say "Strangely, there is no evidence of a similar trend [of increasing incidence of CHD] for women". Is this because Equal Opportunity has not yet advanced far enough to take women from the physical toil of house-keeping and put them on equal wheel-

ing with male commuters? But for the normal (or not so normal these days!) healthy body, let taste, not diet, remain the final arbiter. No doubt those in bondage to the golden car will regard this as mere folly and scandal, yet that symbol of supposed "freedom" increasingly becomes the premature reaper, whether we are saturated or unsaturated.

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## Isolative sound-change

SIR,—I should like to propose the following explanation for the isolative vowel sound-change from Anglo-Saxon  $\bar{a}$  through Middle English  $\bar{o}$  to Modern English  $\bar{o}$  (as in *mote*) instanced by Alan Ross (April 22, page 664).

If you open your mouth, say "ah", and continue the utterance while gradually allowing your mouth to relax and close you will find yourself recapitulating, in the course of seconds, the same sequence of sound changes as your correspondent cites as having occurred over centuries, and for the same basic reason, namely a gradual tendency to open the mouth less wide to make the vowel sound—in a word, laziness. (It is interesting to compare the current marked tendency for the modern Persian  $\bar{a}$ —which is nearer to "aw" than to "ah"—to lapse into  $\bar{u}$ , for example, *Teherān* to *Teherūn*).

In some areas of England, where vowels are stronger, the transition has not yet reached the third stage. To give a ready example, listeners to the BBC television series "When the Boat Comes in" may have noticed that the pronunciation there of *boat* still approximates to the Middle English  $b\bar{o}t$ —as its surviving spelling indeed suggests it should.

I believe that the laziness principle also explains the tendency to lapse from *fire* to *far*, and so on. And surely it accounts for the tendency for our short vowels—*a* as in *Indian*, *e* as in *absent*, *i* along with *o* as in *station*, and *o* as in *onion*—to lapse into the basic *un*-sound found onomatopoeically in *grunt*. But I would not suggest that it could account for all isolative vowel changes, because undoubtedly there is a complex of physical and psychological factors involved.

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