

CORRESPONDENCE

Bradford University

SIR — I write to draw attention to a serious mis-statement in an article on page 248 of *Nature* of 24 September. I do so because its damaging implications have caused grave concern amongst a number of my colleagues who realize how much trust your readers put in the reliability of what is reported in your journal.

The facts are as follows. In September your colleague, Judy Redfearn, explained to me on the telephone that she was writing an article on the reactions of various universities to the contents of the letters they received from the UGC in July last, and she asked me to indicate what was happening at Bradford. I explained that we had initiated a process of consultation and wide discussion which would seek out "grass roots" opinion and culminate in decisions by our senate in December on the new academic profile for the university. She then pressed me to say what we were going to do about the specific advice given by the UGC, such as a possible closure of Biological Sciences. I repeated that the matter was under discussion since the UGC had indicated to universities that an opportunity would be given for the consideration of alternative proposals but that these would have to be contained within the total student numbers allocated to sciences in the university.

It is surprising to find that what was a description of an option open to us becomes not only a statement of a preference (a policy decision) but a selection of which specific areas would thereby be penalized.

I wish to state most emphatically that the University of Bradford has *not* decided that it "would prefer to cut its physics and chemistry departments rather than biology". Besides being untrue the statement of 24 September destroys the internal consistency of your article where it is correctly reported that we shall not be making any decisions until December.

F.M. WILLIS

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WE apologize to Professor Willis for having misconstrued his meaning — Editor, *Nature*

Sheldrake's truth

SIR — I read with interest and alarm your editorial "A Book for Burning?" (*Nature* 24 September p.245), in which you criticized Rupert Sheldrake's new book *A New Science of Life* (Blond & Briggs, London, 1981). In particular, a strong, sometimes even hysterical, attack was directed at Sheldrake's alleged belief in the "failure" of molecular biology and at his "vague notion" that the idea of morphogenetic fields, developed by embryologists such as Conrad Waddington and elaborated mathematically by theoreticians such as Rene Thom, can find wider application in the life sciences. Sheldrake's views were denounced as "pseudoscience", "populist" and as introducing "magic" into science. It was implicit in the editorial that Sheldrake is to be considered as an exponent of the intellectually bankrupt nineteenth-century doctrine of vitalism, which has quite rightly been forced to yield place to the subsequently productive (but arguably no less mystical) reductionist

schools of thought.

If I understand Sheldrake correctly, it seems that his conception of molecular biology is not as a sterile failure, but as an important and crucial contribution to the analysis of problems of intracellular organization on which the physiology of the whole organism clearly depends. All Sheldrake appears to have done, then, is to state that the whole is not just the sum of its constituent parts and that higher organizational states cannot be understood in reductionist terms. Although his book is not without its scientific solecisms, Sheldrake has raised many stimulating arguments, and presents an important landmark in the application of a formal geometry to living things as begun by Waddington and Thom. Certainly, I feel that the book is too important to dismiss easily, and in conclusion I should like to recall Milton's dictum that "... Truth never comes into the World but like a Bastard, to the ignominy of him that brought her forth". (*The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, 1643-44).

M.T. ISAAC

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Appeal to humanity

SIR — With a great feeling of sorrow, we have learned of the latest frequent violations of human rights in the Soviet Union. This time it was the arrest of a physicist, Dr A. Paritsky, together with his wife, living at Str. Tonkopiya 19/2 apt. 48, Kharkov 310091, USSR. Their only fault was a deep desire to live in Israel. In all countries of the free world, any person can leave the country where he was born, but only in the Soviet Union is this considered to be treason. Many Soviet Jews would like to leave the Soviet Union owing to anti-semitism which becomes stronger every day. Among them are many scientists. However, the government of the Soviet Union not only fires them immediately, but in most cases also refuses them the fulfillment of their legal rights. The result of these actions is a vicious circle: on the one hand, some Jewish scientists in the Soviet Union are deprived of the possibility of working according to their speciality, and thus earning their living, but on the other hand they are not allowed to leave the Soviet Union.

An example of this situation is the fate of Dr Paritsky and his family. The family applied for exit visas five years ago. Dr Paritsky and his wife were fired immediately from their work, after that they were refused immigration to Israel, and now they have been arrested.

I would like to apply through your journal to the world scientific community to raise their voices in the defence of the Paritsky family and other Soviet Jewish scientists waiting for exit visas. We must demand that the government of the Soviet Union release Dr Paritsky and give his family permission to emigrate to Israel. I cannot agree with the argument that this action is interference in the internal affairs of the Soviet Union, since the defence of human rights is our common task. On the contrary, we have a bad historical experience in the silence of the international scientific community in the thirties which allowed the Nazi government to do what it wanted.

BORIS S. KRUMGAIZ

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Lab. explosion

SIR — A violent explosion occurred recently in our laboratories, following a routine preparation and crystallization of cobalt (II) perchlorate [cobalt (II) chlorate (VII)]. Full details are not yet available, but we understand that between 10 and 20 g of the salt had been prepared by allowing aqueous perchloric acid to react with an excess of cobalt (II) carbonate, filtering off the excess carbonate, reducing the volume and crystallizing the salt, and that the explosion occurred when the caked mass of crystals was placed in a mortar and tapped gently to break it up. No organic matter is thought to have been present, but adventitious material cannot of course be ruled out. The explosion punched a hole through a standard teak bench-top, and fragments of the mortar were ejected through the window glass several metres away.

Pure samples of this compound are normally handled casually without incident, and very little has been found in the literature to indicate any risk of detonation under mild mechanical shock. Cobalt perchlorate and similar salts are readily available commercially, and the bottles carry little or no hazard warning. In the absence of any clear explanation for our explosion, we suggest that it is prudent to handle these materials with extreme caution, and that any form of mechanical disturbance (scraping, tapping, grinding) of the dried salts should be rigorously avoided.

We hope to report further on the circumstances of the incident following detailed investigations, and would be pleased to hear of any similar accidents or any relevant information.

P.J. ROBINSON

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Naming names

SIR — Upon my return from vacation, I was taken aback to discover that I was referred to in your editorial of 3 September (p.2) as one of the creators or co-authors of the works of Isadore (Isidore) Nabi. This is completely untrue.

I am shocked that you make this allegation without checking with the people concerned, presumably on the basis of claims by some third party who prefers to hide behind the anonymity of a *Nature* editor. The error in relation to my own role causes me to doubt the accuracy of the rest of the claims in the editorial, including those about Professor Nabi. I have now had the opportunity to read two of the Nabi papers, "On the tendencies of motion" and "An evolutionary interpretation of the English sonnet". Both are satirical works, the former on systems ecology and the latter on sociobiology. In no way are the views of the author hidden or invested with false authority due to the author's name.

I will consider the publication of this letter a sufficient rectification of your error and am willing to terminate my interest in the matter.

RICHARD LESTER

Harvard University,
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RICHARD LESTER is believed to be a pseudonym of Richard Levins, one of the true culprits — Editor, *Nature*