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LETTERS

Anti-conception

We were especially interested in the comments of Professor Short (This Week, vol 88, p 416), concerning the relationship between breastfeeding and lactation, and research into breastfeeding.

It is certainly true that a relationship exists and has been known for some time to exist between lactation breastfeeding and birth-spacing. Recent research has shown prolonged breastfeeding to be clearly associated with longer birth intervals, especially in more traditional societies where frequent suckling of the baby is common.

Most of the research that has been undertaken on this issue, however, suggests that while from a public health point of view breastfeeding appears to play an effective anti-conceptive role, from an individual standpoint the occurrence of pregnancy among mothers who are still breastfeeding, as shown in the WHO collaborative study, can vary between 1 per cent and 11 per cent according to the population groups under consideration. This clearly places a considerable limitation on the possible promotion of breastfeeding as an anti-conceptive practice.

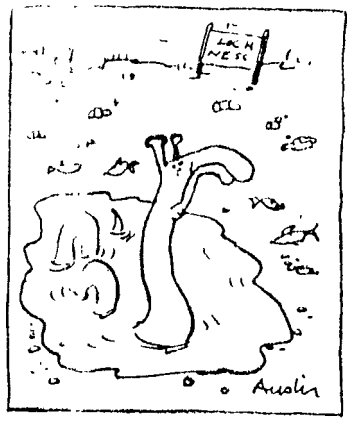
As far as WHO and research into breastfeeding is concerned, Professor Short is not correct. WHO has recently undertaken a prevalence and duration study of breastfeeding in nine countries and is currently undertaking a six-country study of variations in quantity and composition of breastmilk. It is also involved in research into the relationship between lactation and hormonal contraception, and will soon initiate a series of studies into the so-called "insufficient milk syndrome".

Manuel Carballo *Geneva*
World Health Organisation

On the water line

In addition to large reservoirs, many small impounded lochs situated well away from houses and people are covered by the 1930 and 1975 acts. In these circumstances the original use may be redundant and owners are tempted to draw down levels to below the 25 000 cubic metres volume at which the acts come into operation. Unfortunately, this has the effect of reducing small lochs to mere puddles with potentially disastrous effects on the wildlife associated with them. In one recent case the nesting habitat of four species of birds included on schedule 1 of the Bird Protection Acts was threatened.

The reasons for and safety aspects of these acts was made quite clear in "Governments ignore time bombs in Britain's dams" (This Week, 29 January,



p 263) and the recent BBC television programme. But an additional problem and by-product of the Reservoirs Act in its present form might well be the loss of water bodies of wildlife importance because landowners cannot afford to comply but where it is difficult to see any danger to life or property.

E. T. Iddle
Nature Conservancy Council *Edinburgh*

Slimy bottoms

With reference to "Sailors seek solution to slimy bottoms" (Monitor, 26 February, p 531), there is a simple explanation for the proliferation of "slimes" on organotin-based antifouling paints, of which the self-polishing copolymers are an example.

Of fouling bacteria 85-90 per cent are Gram-negative, and organotin anti-fouling compounds are not toxic to this group. The main predators of fouling bacteria are grazing protozoa, to which organotin compounds are toxic. Therefore, organotin anti-fouling paints act as selective substrates, providing a favourable environment for Gram-negative, marine fouling bacteria. A case of one man's poison being another man's medicine!

The situation is similar for cuprous-oxide based anti-fouling paints, where copper-tolerant fouling bacteria produce much more adhesive "slime" than their counterparts growing on organotin-based paints. These polysaccharide-based "slimes" can chelate heavy metals, presumably their excessive production on copper-containing paints contributes to the copper-tolerance of the bacteria.

The heavy fouling by diatoms requires a different explanation because, unlike Gram-negative bacteria, they are not inherently tolerant of organotin compounds. However, because reproduction is predominantly by binary fission, tolerant individuals soon give rise to tolerant populations. Also, it is possible that the initial colonisation by bacteria produces a barrier-layer on the paint surface, rendering it less toxic.

G. F. Daniel,
M. J. Dempsey *Portsmouth*

Nature conservation

May I suggest to T. A. O'Brien (Letters, 26 February, p 580) that "the ultimate aim" of any wildlife preservation group should not be to bring about and enhance the beauty of the countryside for the benefit of all members of society.

It should surely be for the preservation of all forms of wildlife first, last and all time, and not for the benefit of groups no matter how much their members pay, or how good a value for money the groups may give.

Leslie Duckworth *Codsall*

Asbestos

I read Barry Castleman's article on the Hindustan Ferodo factory in Bombay with amazement ("Double standards: asbestos in India", 26 February, p 522). He says it is based on a visit to the plant last year. Neither he nor any representative of your journal has ever visited our plant.

Every statement he makes about the plant is untrue. Over the past six years the Bombay factory inspectorate has been so impressed by Hindustan Ferodo's dust control that it has arranged for representatives of local cotton textile mills to visit the plant to learn from the methods we employ.

We are surprised that you should have printed such misleading material without taking the trouble to check the truth of the allegations you have made either with Turner and Newall or with Hindustan Ferodo.

N. Venkataraman
Hindustan Ferodo Ltd *Bombay*

Our authors reply

The India investigation was conducted by one of us (RM) in close consultation with the other, one year ago. The information on Hindustan Ferodo was obtained in a several-hour interview with a lower management employee who had been at the factory for some years. We conducted the interview in his office, in a building just a few metres away from the manufacturing facility. The employee appeared to be knowledgeable and honest in his answers. We immediately taped the notes of the interview, and a full account was published last year (B. I. Castleman, and M. J. Vera Vera, "Impending proliferation of asbestos", *International Journal of Health Services*, vol 10, p 401).

We stand by our story.

Barry I. Castleman
Robert Maines *Maryland*

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