

The debate continues

SIR—In the test system used by Benveniste and his co-workers¹ there was another source of anti-IgE which the authors were apparently not aware of — namely the basophils themselves. In recent years naturally occurring auto-anti-IgE antibodies of the IgM^{2,3} and IgG⁴⁻⁸ classes have been described in a large proportion of normal people and patients with allergic manifestations. Data on the biological and physiological effects of auto-anti-IgE in man and rodents are now being reported at an increasing rate and are contained in a current volume devoted to this subject⁹. IgG anti-IgE, unlike IgM anti-IgE autoantibody, is directed against the heat labile D₂ antigen of human Fc. It circulates as a free molecule or in immune complex form with self IgE. IgE-IgG anti-IgE complexes are found on mast cells and basophils where they are anchored to the membrane via the Fc portion of IgE. Amongst other *in vivo* and *in vitro* activities, IgG anti-IgE autoantibody can degranulate basophils and mast cells much as heterologous anti-IgE does.

Benveniste and his team did not exclude spontaneous basophil degranulation by auto-anti-IgE, a possibility supported by their admission to *Nature*'s team that the best results were obtained when cells were left overnight before counting. The fact that not all people have high or detectable IgG anti-IgE autoantibody explains why some blood samples gave negative degranulation results. Lack of degranulation in the control, where anti-IgG was used instead, does not invalidate this explanation as the control was carried out at a different time from the test run. Besides, there have been periods when cells did not regranulate even with anti-IgE.

Benveniste and co-workers should now repeat their experiments using cells stripped of their IgE and re-sensitized with known uncomplexed IgE.

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SIR—The editorial staff of *Experientia* has followed with great interest and fullest sympathy the 'alarums and excursions' following your publication of the by now famous (or infamous?) Benveniste report.

We found your singular and 'unorthodox' decision to include James Randi in the investigation team courageous. Recently (*Experientia* 44, No. 4, April 1988) we published a multi-author review, coordinated by Professor David Marks, on 'Investigating the Paranormal'. One of the authors was Randi, and he described in vivid language and detail the 'debunking' of 'psychic' events at a widely publicized 'television preacher's' meeting. From what we know of Randi, his almost uncanny ability to detect fraud (whether conscious or unwitting) from his great experience in practical conjuring makes him an ideal investigator, quite apart from his intellectual honesty.

Surely it is the duty of multidisciplinary journals such as *Nature* and *Experientia* not only to publish 'serious', 'first-rate' science, but to provide a forum for imaginative — and thus risky — ventures into new fields, stimulating others to investigate the phenomena described.

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SIR—If we are to continue to hear arguments about the Benveniste findings, perhaps a *reductio ad absurdum* argument should be considered. One needs only to drink high purity deionized water to have a cure for all diseases subject to chemical therapy, as all chemicals are present in this pure water in infinite dilution.

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SIR—The stage magician's first rule is to divert the audience's attention from what is actually taking place. It therefore needs to be mentioned that the presence of a skilled stage magician during a scientific test is a double-edged sword. The presence of James Randi during *Nature*'s observations of Benveniste's experiments would seem to guard against any sleight-of-hand on the part of Benveniste's staff. Unfortunately, it is also the case that Randi could easily have used his skill to influence or even determine the apparent outcome of the experiments, with nobody present realizing it.

This is not a moot point, as Randi makes no secret of the fact that he has interfered intentionally in experiments involving 'fringe areas' of science. For example, a widely reported New York news conference called by Randi in January 1983 disclosed his use of two young magician associates to subvert the experiments of Dr Peter Phillips, a physicist at the McDonnell Laboratory for Psychical Research in St Louis, Missouri.

How are we to be any less sceptical of

the *Nature* review, in which Randi played a prominent part, than we were of the original Benveniste report?

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SIR—Another disturbing aspect of the Benveniste affair is your statement that the decision to publish the original paper was based partly on its coming from the head of a major laboratory and that similar papers from unknowns would be dealt with less positively. To the extent that this attitude prevails among editors (and I am one) it must contribute to the suppression of genuinely unconventional advances.

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Availability of theses

SIR—The correspondence started by Beverly Halstead (*Nature* 331, 497; 1988) about the training of PhD students and the value of theses has raised many fundamental issues, such as whether theses should consist of previously published articles or not. One of the arguments presented in favour of publication was the inaccessibility of PhD theses in their present form.

The British Library Document Supply Centre at Boston Spa has for the past 18 years been trying to improve the availability of British doctoral theses. Almost all UK universities now send their theses to the British Library for microfilming. These films or enlargements thereof are then available for loan or retention.

Information on the 75,000 theses now held and on the 5,000 being added to stock each year is contained in the library's monthly publication *British Reports, Translations and Theses*. Since 1985, bibliographic details of new theses have also been added to the SIGLE (System for Information on Grey Literature in Europe) online database accessible through BLAISE. From this year, details of theses held at Boston Spa will also be included in the Dissertation Abstracts International databases produced by University Microfilms International.

Despite some assertions (see *New Scientist*, 21 January) that few theses are consulted by more than four people (author, supervisor and two external examiners) the Document Supply Centre provided copies of more than 13,000 during 1987.

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